

THE
MERRIVALE MYSTERY

JAMES CORBETT

W. C. Calkins

THE MERRIVALE MYSTERY

WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

A strange family were the Merrivales of Merrivale Hall. They all lived in the great house, but the atmosphere was tense with hate, and the members of the family met only for meals in the dining-room, when silence, cold and bitter, was the invariable rule. Merrivale Hall, indeed, housed enmity and strife and all uncharitableness; and when Sir Philip Merrivale was found murdered it housed tragedy as well, and a brooding fear and suspicion which hung over all that loveless family like a sombre cloud.

In this very original story are related the strange events which followed the murder of Sir Philip, and the further tragedies which occurred before Victor Serge finally solved the mystery surrounding the ill-fated Merrivales. An ingenious and thrilling detective story.

THE MERRIVALE MYSTERY

BY

JAMES CORBETT

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I dedicate this first novel to one who had faith
in me from the beginning—my mother!

The Author.

Bristol, 1929.

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THE MERRIVALE MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

THE FIRST CRIME

"**S**IR PHILIP MERRIVALE was murdered last night, and the tragedy took place at Merrivale Hall, Dunseaton, a town five miles outside Reading!" Those were the words that came over the telephone.

"Why the delay in ringing me up, Bancroft?" asked Serge, the famous detective. He was speaking from his London flat in Jermyn Street, and in the same room, listening to this conversation at another receiver, sat his young friend Ralph Moreton, the novelist.

"Because," said Bancroft along the wire, "it seemed a simple case of suicide, but we have had to revise that opinion. The baronet was shot through the base of the brain, and although a revolver lay on the nearest table, we have ruled out the suicide theory completely. The case has got terribly complicated, and we find ourselves hopelessly in the dark. Three of us have been down there all night. I am speaking now from the Yard Headquarters, where

the Chief authorises me to give you the message at once, and to ask if you would be good enough to assist. He makes the request as a special favour, Serge, and the rest of us will keep behind the scenes."

"You will do nothing of the kind," Serge answered. "We are all in this business, and you must get the chance to retrieve the Paddington affair. Now look here, be a little more explicit. What has happened at Merrivale Hall, and why do you surmise a mystery?"

"The circumstances are terribly unusual," Bancroft continued, "and Merrivale Hall is a hotbed of mystery and intrigue. It is a place of strange happenings and events, and it is filled with the most extraordinary people. The baronet returned two weeks ago from the Continent, and it happened to be his second honeymoon, for he has been married twice. Lady Merrivale—his young wife—is one of the loveliest women in England, and she is prostrate with the shock. We were unable to get much information from her. Sir Philip Merrivale retired to the library after dinner, and the shot rang out a few minutes afterwards. Lady Merrivale was the first to appear on the scene, but it appears she fainted and had to be carried upstairs. A maid confirms that part of it."

"Two other Yard men are down there?"

"Yes, Dawson and Anderson. I shall be back in a few hours at the Hall, but it was necessary to make a personal report to the Chief, and to see if he could secure your assistance. We have made a

thorough search over Hall and grounds, but there is not a single clue or finger-print, and everything points to the greatest mystery for ten years. The baronet does not appear to have had a single enemy—that is, no enemy outside the Hall—and as there is no financial trouble of any kind, one can find no motive for the crime. But I want your opinion of the inmates of the Hall. They are the rummiest crowd on earth, and we can make nothing of them. I suppose you know the place?”

“Yes, I passed it five years ago,” Serge answered. “It was during a motor tour through that part of England, and I thought it one of our most famous beauty spots. I could see the outline of Merrivale Hall through the trees, and I never saw a finer mansion. It seems more like a palace!”

“Exactly—it is more like Arcady than anything I have seen—but as regards the occupants of Merrivale Hall, I want you to form your own conclusion. They appear a most extraordinary lot of people, and I am not certain if they are rational.”

A cough from Serge betrayed his growing interest, and Moreton felt the big mystery drama had at last arrived.

“How many people are staying at the Hall?”

“You will find a crowd of them, and it will be difficult to segregate them in component parts. Lady Merrivale is there with her sister and brother, who are named Tabitha and Cecil. Cousin Lilian follows, and she is a gem of audacity in herself. After that we have the baronet’s sister, his younger brother Stephen, and their cousin George. As if that was

not sufficient, you will find two half-brothers and a mysterious French valet. There are also a number of foreign servants, and I can't remember all their names!"

"What a medley!" . . . "What are they all doing at the Hall, Bancroft?"

"I want you to discover that," came the enigmatic reply. "Personally, I confess myself bewildered, and I was glad when the Chief said to get in touch with you. I am thanking my stars you are disengaged."

"It was kind of the Chief to do me this honour. Give him my regards, and say I am catching the next train for Dunseaton. *Au revoir*, Bancroft."

Serge put down the receiver and looked across at his young friend. Ralph Moreton was a giant for his age, but he was an athlete every inch. He had deep-set blue eyes that never wavered, and all the self-assurance of the literary man. He had been studying for the Bar, but his pen brought him to a London publishing house, and his work secured him independence. Apart from that, he was the son of a wealthy stockbroker.

"I must go with you!" Moreton exclaimed with determination. "You see my position, Serge. So far, I have been doing imaginative work, relying on mental pictures, filling in details. It has meant three best-sellers, I am glad to say, but I want realism, and you are the man to give me that!"

Serge lit a fresh cigarette and nodded. He was a man with a distinctive personality, and nothing was more impressive than his two brilliant dark eyes.

They took in everything in a flash, yet they remained eternally smiling and self-possessed. He was forty-four years of age, of medium height, with dark hair and broad shoulders, and was invariably dressed in a light blue suit, one that fitted to Saville Row perfection. His voice contained a dramatic ring.

"Yes, I think you are going to be lucky," he reflected. "You will be surprised to hear I can do with a secretary. I have sent Miss Villars to Spain for three months. She was run down, and I told her not to return until I sent for her. If you care to make yourself useful, Moreton, writing occasional letters and looking up files, you may consider yourself engaged."

"I shall be delighted," Moreton answered. "I am glad that is settled. For the next three months I am at your service, and this case may last some time. I have read all your adventures, am tremendously interested in your class of work, but I want to observe your methods and see how you get on the track of things—even to anticipate the solution at which you arrive. All that will be very interesting."

Serge rose and commenced to pack.

"This sort of work makes one a fatalist," he observed. "Just when a clue is remote, Moreton, when everything seems dead against you, and all the papers cry out about your lack of intelligence, Fate steps in with an occult pointer. I have seen that kind of thing happen—even in the most deliberately-planned murder."

Moreton started packing his own bag. He had just been paying one of his unexpected visits, and Serge was always glad to see him for he had known Moreton's father in the old days. Quick to notice details, he sent his gaze round the room, and was struck by the realisation that Serge was an artist, a consummate artist of a high order. Not only was the London flat sumptuously furnished, with every sign of luxury and comfort, but the room itself was a model of art. It boasted two of the finest oil paintings in Europe, and the piano was the most expensive of its kind. Serge could play that instrument exquisitely, and as for the book-shelves, they were lined with a rare collection of treasures.

"That is just what I'm after," Moreton replied. "I want to get on the track of something intricate, a cul-de-sac where one is dead up against it, where everything is blackness and mystery. May I ask how long a clue has eluded you, Serge?"

"Two years. That happened in the Plymouth murder after the Armistice, and the Yard was baffled over that business. I had to confess failure for a long time, but I kept in touch with it, and in two years I got an anonymous postcard and arrested my man!"

"I remember reading about it," Moreton continued, putting the strap round his bag. "That was a big star in your crown, Serge, for you had the Yard beaten at every point, and they have never forgotten it. Then there was the Clerkenwell crime, the Post Office mail-bag robbery, and that trunk murder at Paddington. I have been following you since I left

Oxford. . . . Look here, I suppose there is no such thing as the perfect crime?"

Serge placed a revolver in his case, and regarded his friend through a haze of cigarette smoke. "I have often heard about such a thing," he said quietly, "but it remains to be discovered. You mean a crime where there is no possibility of detection, where there may be a suspicion as to the actual murderer, but where no evidence exists?"

"Not altogether. I am referring to a crime perfect in every detail, without throwing implication on anyone, without suggesting how the murder was committed."

Serge shrugged his shoulders.

"A crime of that kind may exist in the region of phantasy, but we rarely meet it in actual life. I am always hoping such a crime might be committed—that is part of my selfish nature—but we are living in a world of weaklings—a universe where there is indisputably a Providence!"

"What exactly do you mean?"

"I mean just when you are congratulating yourself, when you think you have discovered the perfect crime, when every particle of data seems to reveal the master-mind, Fate steps in with a deliberate pointer, a destiny clue that is unmistakable—which means I have only one word for Fate."

"You infer we cannot rule out Providence?"

"We cannot rule out the Supreme Being. Providence meets us at every corner of the road, and if you want to be sure there is a God, Moreton, or want to cure yourself of atheism, just devote some portion of your

life to criminology. To my mind, God is only another word for Justice, but somewhere in the universe Justice reigns, and Justice has her emissaries."

"Let us hope they are all members of your profession," Moreton said politely. "But if there is no such thing as the perfect crime, why do you hope to discover it?"

"I have never ruled out the perfect crime. What I mean is this: we have met the master-mind in crime, a kind of super-intelligence where every detail is planned, where the faintest possibility of a clue is eliminated, where only the slightest blunder leads to arrest. But I conceive that the perfect crime may occur, that even the slight blunder may not be noticed, where all the detectives would be baffled. Possibly there have been those perfect performances, and naturally they have not been chronicled, but I have never encountered a crime of that description."

"I wonder if I shall be lucky!" Moreton ruminated.

"I have contemplated the perfect crime myself," Serge said quietly.

Moreton looked round. "What!" he exclaimed. "You don't mean it, Serge?"

"Yes, I do mean it, and just imagine the laugh I would have to outwit all the crime experts of the world! Yes, the idea has occurred to me at odd moments—moments I dare say when partly sane!"

Moreton chuckled. He had finished packing, and was staring at the mantelpiece. Why did it not contain a single feminine portrait, and why had Serge kept to bachelordom? What had made him

such a woman-hater? "How you would fool them at Scotland Yard!" he ventured.

"Yes, the story would be found in my diary after my death," Serge continued. "I should leave a chain of evidence, and would make it my business to show I had duped the world. But do not overlook we have some good men at the Yard, some singularly astute and clever individuals, and even they are surpassed by the French detectives. At Paris, friend, they have a wonderful organisation at Sûreté headquarters, directed by a centralised staff of experts, and they make an absolute study of criminology. They follow crime in all its phases and developments, and far outshine the American system. The experts at the Sûreté Générale are the greatest in the world. I have proved it."

Moreton put on his overcoat. "Yes, they go the whole hog in Paris," he admitted. "I have read their methods carefully. They study the human face in all its characteristics, with all its defects and abnormalities, but I am not certain you are right. They theorise a good deal in France, but with men like you working in co-operation with the Yard, I think we have a greater record of convictions."

"Possibly, but we have few planned crimes this side the Channel. Comparatively speaking, it is an easy matter to get a clue in England, or even to work up a clue, but there is a much larger field on the Continent, and things are arranged differently. Here the area is more restricted and circumscribed. But a man plans a murder comfortably in Europe and, even after a clue has been left, he has a potential

chance of escape. It is one thing to land on the actual clue, Moreton, but quite another to find the murderer, particularly when he has crossed to Asia, or outmanoeuvred you over the Herring Pond."

"There seem more *crimes passionnel* in France," Moreton maintained, "and where you are dealing with the emotions, I suspect the chances of detection are easier. Do you agree?"

"It depends on the brain behind. As you say, the passion crime looks easy of detection, but after the passionate act is committed, and when the brain has cooled, a man often resorts to subtle stratagem to hide his guilt. A woman is different. A woman is at the mercy of primitive elements."

Moreton looked interested.

"You contend that few women murderers are cornered?" he asked. "I think that a debatable point. It is easy to see what you mean, easy to realise a woman is more elemental than man, but I am going to suggest something. I venture to state that if the perfect crime is committed, and you happen to get on the track of it, you will find it has been perpetrated by a woman!"

Serge laughed good-humouredly. "You forget that the perfect crime could never be brought home to the individual. Yet assuming it could, Moreton, assuming the individual was a woman, what leads you to think the opposite sex would have the necessary intelligence?"

Moreton flung his cigarette away and lit a cheroot. "It's not a question of intelligence so much as subtlety," he debated, "and that after all may be

subconscious. Fortunately for the Sûreté headquarters and Scotland Yard, few murders are committed by the other sex; but if women went in for that kind of thing, their subtlety might beat you every time."

"I daresay, but you ignore one point," Serge observed, as he completed his packing. "You forget—just as those women might forget—that feminine emotion is more positive, dynamic, and self-absorbing, and naturally one would concentrate on the emotional dynamics. Those factors cover a wide range, but carefully analysed, grouped, and graded, I think a vital clue would evolve, and your siren of crime would be ultimately netted. No, I hardly imagine the perfect crime will be committed by a woman!"

"How I wish it were possible!" Moreton groaned. "Just imagine the plot I could weave for a best-seller. You, the most advanced expert of the age, baffled in the end by a woman, a girl with whom you fall passionately in love, and where love blinds you to a sense of her guilt. Heavens, what one would give for such a unique set of circumstances!"

.

Two hours later, Moreton and Serge walked up the avenue leading to Merrivale Hall.

"We were lucky to catch that train," Serge observed, "so let us hope the same goddess will continue to smile. On the other hand, we are several hours late!"

"That is the worst of being a celebrity," Moreton exclaimed. "Had you been an ordinary sleuth-

hound, you would have arrived here last night at the kill, but as it is, you have the profound consolation of knowing every clue has been obliterated, and that Bancroft has made a mess of things into the bargain. How delightful to start with a clean slate of that kind!"

"Yes, that is the tragic part of it," Serge growled, as he strode forward. "I hate to be late on a job of this sort. I know the Yard cannot send for me every occasion—that would be too great humiliation on their part—but Bancroft might have rung me up this morning. Anticipating my arrival, he tried to get his oar in first, and I wonder how much he has gleaned?"

Both men paused at that dramatic second, for they had turned the bend of the avenue, and Merrivale Hall came straight into view. Although the hour was only eight, a brilliant moon shone overhead, and the scene was strangely beautiful. On the right of the immense building lay a great lake, on the left a dense foliage of trees, and close to the Hall was a wonderful garden of flowers. As they approached nearer, Serge observed the mansion was quite the modern type, and that its stately design could not be surpassed. On every side were unmistakable signs of luxury and wealth. This Hall was not maintained on a pittance, for it was suitable for a member of the blood royal.

"A delightful place for a murder," Moreton muttered. "But isn't the silence ghastly? And why are those rooms lit up, Serge? I suppose they are either preparing for dinner, or holding a social

gathering of some kind. People do eat, I presume, when there is a murdered body about!" Moreton was too excited for food at the moment. It was his first contact with crime, and even in the presence of Serge he was timid and hesitant. Merrivale Hall was like a palace in its munificence and grandeur, with its pine trees and gorgeous scenery, but there was an atmosphere of mystery that gave one a chill. What would those next few moments reveal!

"I arrive at the conclusion that dinner is served," Serge affirmed, "and I see the blinds have been drawn as a conventional necessity. I take it also that the dining-room is on the left—you see the outline of the enormous chandeliers—human shadows are cast on those blinds, and a few servants are moving about. I wonder if we are in time for dinner, Moreton!"

His young friend gasped.

"You don't mean you are going to eat in that house!" he exclaimed. "Why, I have nausea in my stomach already, and cold shivers run down my spine. They would poison you into the bargain!"

"I suppose you have got that revolver?" Serge observed in a low voice. "I placed one on the table before we left. Good. I do not generally carry a firearm of that kind, but thought it wise to bring one on this occasion. It will give you an added sense of security, Moreton, and no doubt an emergency will arise. If so, you must fire without hesitation—but do not shoot a member of Scotland Yard!"

Moreton nodded. "I'm taking no risks on this

picnic," he said grimly, touching his overcoat significantly. "But you have not answered my question. You don't mean you will eat anything in that house?"

"It depends on the courtesy of the inhabitants. Frankly, I am not thinking of the intestinal glands at present. Ah, as I thought. Here are Dawson and Anderson on the terrace. They have been awaiting our arrival. . . . How are you, friends? Glad you have not fallen asleep on such a beautiful night! What is the latest bulletin from the Western front?"

Both men saluted, descended the terrace steps, and Dawson spoke first.

"Mr. Bancroft said he would ring you up, sir!"

"He has done so, and we may expect him by a later train. I understand he is making a comprehensive report, and possibly he will arrange for two men to relieve you. Have you found anything, Dawson?"

"Nothing of significance, sir. There have been no visitors except the family doctor, and they are not expecting anyone. These are strange people, sir, and you will find them most extraordinary. Acting on special instructions from Mr. Bancroft, and following your own advice, we have not informed the Press for the present, but we expect the news will filter through to-night—then we shall have a crowd of reporters by the first train!"

"I will see to that part of it. This is Ralph Moreton, my new secretary. You can speak freely before him, Dawson." The detectives saluted once more, and Moreton extended his cigarette case in friendly fashion. This little human touch put them at their

ease. Moreton knew both were typical Yard men, each having a commendable record, and Serge had proved their reliability. They worshipped Serge as a super-intelligence, an admiration they did not extend to Frank Bancroft, who they felt was too conscious of his superiority, and although they respected him as a brilliant colleague, they had an instinctive sense that he was mediocre. They regarded Serge as the real sleuth-hound, and were prepared to give their lives for him.

"What have you done?" Serge asked swiftly.

"We have prowled about and watched everyone," Dawson answered. "Mr. Bancroft gave us definite instructions to see that nothing was touched, and we have carried them out to the letter. We have also done little interviewing, postponing all that till you arrived, sir. Even Mr. Bancroft hardly ventured to ask a question, although he was anxious to cross-examine Lady Merrivale. . . . So far, no clue has been found, and we have simply been waiting your arrival. As regards the occupants of the Hall, I must say they are the rummiest lot I have met for a long time. They are having dinner at present!"

"So they are not interested in the murder?"

Anderson grinned. "It almost seems so," he replied. "I can see no signs of grief, and even Lady Merrivale has now recovered. She is a very beautiful young woman, sir, but she has aroused the antagonism of Mr. Bancroft. He regards her with the most profound suspicion."

CHAPTER II

IS LADY MERRIVALE GUILTY?

SERGE eyed the speaker thoughtfully. "Of course," Dawson continued, "he has not the slightest grounds for doing so. She had luncheon to-day with the rest of them, and appears to have been reading a book in her room. We have not ventured to disturb her, but we have watched her carefully."

"Are you under the impression that the individual we want is inside that Hall?"

"We hardly know what to think, but we know that the place is a great lump of mystery, sir, and once you have got the atmosphere, I think you will arrive at the same conclusion."

"I never saw such a group in my life," his companion affirmed. "These people all hate each other like the devil, Mr. Serge, and so far as we can see from outside observation, they prefer to keep their mouths shut in frigid silence!"

Serge glanced at Moreton with a sly twinkle. "This is going to be a best-seller," he announced. "Get your note-book handy, young man."

"I suggest we have a look round," Moreton said impatiently. He was always a creature for action, and this messing about was getting on his nerves.

Serge regarded him commiseratively. "One can understand your temperamental energy," he said

quietly, "but this is mostly a game of patience, Moreton, and a wrong move at this juncture might precipitate disaster. . . . Dawson, as we are out of earshot of the Hall, I want to ask a few questions, and you can answer as quickly as possible. Do these people know I'm coming?"

"I hardly think so," Dawson said respectfully. "I did not hear Mr. Bancroft mention it, sir, and we had no desire to disclose the information. Yet I hardly imagine they care who comes, sir, or what is done about this murder. They seem to be speculating about the inquest, and are mildly curious why we send no word to the newspapers!"

Serge gazed at the huge mansion, silhouetted dramatically against the moonlight, almost beckoning him to enter. "Can you give me your assurance," he asked, "that no one but the doctor entered the Hall?"

"We can do that positively, sir. As soon as we arrived last night, Mr. Bancroft stationed himself inside the Hall, Dawson prowled the terrace and servants' quarters, and I kept the Lodge gate. We know that no one left the Hall except the doctor, and no one expresses any wish to leave it. That is just the funny part of it!"

"And the shot was fired immediately after dinner last night?"

"Precisely, sir. It appears the baronet had just entered the library—which, as you see, is situated on the left side of the Hall—and his wife ran to him when the shot rang out. We are told she fainted at once, and had to be carried upstairs, but the baronet was killed instantly!"

"What do you make of all these relatives at the Hall, Anderson? They seem a strange collection!"

"That problem is deeper than I can fathom," Anderson declared. "One might fancy these people were after the money-bags, but that theory does not fit in with the baronet's second marriage. As that occurred only recently, it might have been reasonable for everyone to clear out, but these relatives have been living here for years, and it looks as if they intended to be buried inside the grounds! . . . Now what are they all doing at the Hall? Even Mr. Bancroft cannot answer that question!"

Serge smiled in spite of himself. Even Bancroft!

"So you have discovered nothing?"

"Not a scrap of evidence, sir, and the dead body still lies in the library. As regards a clue, or the faintest indication of one, everything is a terrible blank."

Serge bestirred himself. "Thanks for the information," he said courteously. "I shall now carry on with my examination. Meanwhile, remain vigilant until you are relieved. I expect you are both tired after an all-night search. But remember my instructions. No one must enter or leave the Hall without permission, and I should like to know of any fresh arrival."

"Very good, sir," and both men sprang to attention.

Serge mounted the terrace steps, accompanied by his young friend, and they entered Merrivale Hall together. There was a short parley with the butler, during which a servant relieved them of their outer

coats, then they were shown into the library, and the butler closed the door behind them.

The electric light was burning, and the scene was intensely dramatic. Moreton, nervous, hesitant, remained in the background, but Serge moved forward and stood over the dead body. It remained on the floor as it had fallen, and the relatives, presumably acting on a hint from Bancroft, made no effort to remove it.

The face was that of a man of about sixty, with a jaw that even in death revealed an iron personality. He was still in evening dress and, for some reason, the eyes had not closed after *rigor mortis*. They still remained half-open, and in them was a peculiar expression that Serge noted. Near the base of the skull was the track of the bullet-wound, and a pool of blood dyed the carpet.

Moreton, fascinated by the scene, made no effort to speak, but his brain surged with a thousand ideas. He still watched every movement, saw Serge's wonderful instruments pass over the body, the magnetic lens and gleaming microscope, the powerful hand-torch and measuring tape. During the inspection, Moreton knew he was watching a genius. He saw it in the systematic method of the examination, in every movement of those limbs, in every flash from Serge's eye. Afterwards came that minute inspection of the room, a survey of the giant bookshelves, a criticism of the oil paintings, a searching glance in every corner of the apartment. Like everything at Merrivale Hall, the library was lavishly furnished, and it contained at least two thousand

books. Serge ran his eye over the books and saw that they were modern, but amongst them were a few priceless gems of antiquity, and he realised that some of the volumes were worth a fortune. Yet there was still that terrible touch of modernity, as if someone had been specially commissioned to fill the room with books! With that discerning sense of the artist, Serge shuddered at some of the books selected, but his attention was caught at that moment by one of the bookshelves, and it seemed to hold him spellbound. He went over to the shelf and examined it carefully, taking down a few of the books and opening them, searching the covers with his powerful lens, then he replaced them with a little grunt of satisfaction.

Moreton was relieved to hear a human voice, for the mystery of the crime was getting on his nerves. There seemed nothing tangible, nothing upon which one could grip, and even Serge seemed at a dead end. Moreton realised it was one thing to write about a murder in books, but quite different to stand near an unsolved crime. He saw that Serge was baffled, and Serge, the agent of Justice, was the man to arrest the murderer.

"What do you make of the baronet's expression?" Serge asked quietly.

"I have hardly taken my eyes from it," Moreton replied with a repressed shudder. "Ghastly, isn't it? Almost seems alive in a sense, and yet it is easy to see that death came suddenly!"

"I am glad you have that discernment. Do you notice anything else, anything peculiar about the eyes?"

Moreton nodded. "They are more than half-open," he said, hoarsely, "and the expression in them is unnatural. I should imagine the baronet received a horrible shock of some kind!"

"Not quite, but death came in a moment of complete wonder. Interpreted more clearly, the individual with the revolver was either a friend or an unexpected visitor. We have to determine that point."

"You find no sign of a clue?"

Serge made a negative gesture. "No clue suggests itself for the present," he said dispassionately, "and there are no finger-prints. The body has not been touched since it fell in that position. No, we must take the next step and summon Lady Merrivale. She may wish to see me elsewhere, but I prefer a talk over the dead body. Sometimes it has more effect. Will you give one of the servants my message?"

"She is probably dining with the others," Moreton observed.

"I am afraid her dinner will have to wait," Serge answered with the faintest sarcasm. "Let her answer my questions over her husband's body, Moreton. That may give her a better appetite."

Moreton entered the hall, touched a bell, and gave the message to a servant. He returned to the library, and Lady Merrivale entered a few seconds later.

"You sent for me?" she said quietly, looking straight at Serge. She seemed to recognise the criminologist in a flash, but her eyes travelled to Moreton with curiosity.

Serge regarded the newcomer in silence. He was

struck by the exceeding beauty of the girl—she was little more than that—and he noted how unemotional she seemed. Either she was an accomplished actress of high-grade, or still suffered from the shock of the crime. Her eyes were brown and luminous, yet they showed no embarrassment or fear. She was dressed simply, yet with expensive taste, in some dark material she had selected for the occasion, and the white throat glistened in its purity. Serge was stirred, moved indeed beyond words, for never in England had he encountered such loveliness, such divine grace and charm, so bewitching a figure. She stood there waiting his commands, a tall, graceful, statuesque form, staring straight at him.

After that penetrating gaze, Serge bowed formally, but did not remove his challenging glance. He stood on the other side of the rug—the body of the dead baronet at his feet—his hands behind his back. He was gazing into the girl's soul, into the depths of her subconscious nature, and she was strangely aware of it. The pallor left her features, and it was replaced by a faint flush. The brown eyes drooped, but only for a second—and Moreton gasped. What had passed between Serge and this girl? Why was the expert so strangely silent?

"I am sorry to interrupt you at dinner," Serge said in a polite voice, "but too much time has been lost already over this case. Doubtless you know my name, Lady Merrivale? It is Victor Serge, and I have been asked by Scotland Yard to investigate this crime. I am hoping you will give me all the assistance necessary!"

She gazed back without a tremor, yet started at sound of his name. But full recognition came in a moment, and a glance of interest filled the brown eyes. She knew Serge was the greatest expert in England, and had longed to meet him, for she had read his cases in the papers, and, unknown to him, was deeply intrigued by his methods. His portrait too had been in all the papers—and perhaps that portrait had appealed to her more than anything!

"I am willing to give all the help I can," she answered in a low voice, but it thrilled through all his being.

"Have you any suspicion, may I ask, as to who is responsible for this crime?"

Something like a smile appeared on the lovely features, a smile which gradually increased to a ripple of laughter, a strange sound in that room of death. But it died away as faintly as it began.

"I had no idea my query was amusing!" Serge said, with a new sternness.

"Forgive me!" she begged. "You completely misunderstood. I am terribly upset by what has happened, and am hardly accountable for my actions. Your question sounded so odd——"

"On the contrary, it is very relevant," Serge interrupted. "You, of all people, Lady Merrivale, should be the first to answer that query. . . . May I ask if any suspicion has entered your mind?"

He was still gazing at her with his penetrating glance, a glance that spoke of open admiration for her loveliness, and she averted her eyes in some confusion. She glanced again at Moreton.

"That is my secretary, Ralph Moreton," Serge continued. "You are free to speak before him. What you tell me will be held in strict confidence!"

She hardly seemed to be listening. Her eyes were fixed on space. "One has always suspicions on an occasion like this," she murmured, "but I dare not utter my thoughts at present. They are too absurd and incredulous!"

Serge changed his tactics.

"Very well," he said courteously, "we will abandon that query for the present. What can you tell me about the crime, Lady Merrivale? I prefer your own version of everything that occurred."

As he spoke he placed a chair at her disposal, and she sank into it with a movement of weariness. There was something tragic about the beautiful face, something that moved Serge to an instinctive wave of tenderness. This girl was more like a young queen of the Netherlands, one of the heroines Moreton had depicted so often in his novels, and she had come to life in all reality. Serge was fascinated by her beauty, ravished by it in more senses than one. Yet he was asking himself questions. Could this divine creature——? He pushed the thought from him in aversion.

"I can tell you little," she said softly. Her voice thrilled like deepest music, and even Moreton was fascinated by it. "I can only repeat what I told Mr. Bancroft, but he did not believe one word I said. My husband went straight to the library after dinner, and he was there a few minutes when the shot rang out—I rushed downstairs at once. I had gone

to my room with a book, so running down as fast as I could, I found Philip lying on the floor with the blood streaming from his head and that revolver lying on the table."

Serge took the weapon up and examined it. He had done so previously, but he gave it another survey.

"I do not understand why that revolver should be there," she continued, "for it belongs to Philip, and there was no reason for him to commit suicide. I know he did not destroy himself. He was murdered, Mr. Serge. . . . Afterwards, I must have fainted, for everything became a blank, and I remember nothing until I awoke in my room upstairs!"

Serge gave a mute, sympathetic nod, and Moreton was impressed by the sincerity of the words. He tried to banish the suspicion that kept thrusting into his brain, but knew it was a difficult process. The subconscious part of him whispered he was a fool, that Serge was a greater fool, and that they were both being duped by a woman! . . . Looking at that lovely figure more critically, with the brown eyes liquid with unshed tears, he saw the undernote of tragedy in her life. This girl was suffering in some mysterious manner. Why such a hopeless look about her demeanour? What lay at the back of her mind?

"You have just returned from your honeymoon?" Serge spoke as gently as possible. He could in some respects be as tender as a woman, and his voice now was particularly kind.

"Yes!" she breathed, and the lovely face turned to its former pallor.

"You had no quarrel with the baronet before his death?"

"No quarrel of any kind."

"Pardon me asking the question, but was your husband in love with you?" Serge averted his eyes as he asked the question. He seemed to be gazing through the walls of the room.

"Philip was fond of me, but I do not think we entered the zone of sentiment, Mr. Serge. Philip was old enough to be my father. I am twenty-eight, and we were also distantly related!"

Serge drummed on the table with his fingers. Moreton could see he was gathering all his forces for the next question. It came with startling suddenness.

"Whom do you suspect, Lady Merrivale?"

The challenging query was flung across the dead body at his feet, and nothing could have been more dramatic or profound. Even Moreton was staggered by its tragic intensity, its relentless force.

The girl was taken aback for a wild second, for the colour receded from her face, and a half-demented look entered the brown eyes. She had a sudden inspiration to take Serge into confidence, and she spoke in a voice of passionate anger and resentment.

"You want to know who killed my husband?" she demanded. "I can give you the answer to that question, but you will not believe me, for the individual is living in this house. Philip was shot by his own brother Stephen!"

CHAPTER III

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS

NOTWITHSTANDING the shock of the announcement, not a flicker disturbed Serge's features. He sat there like a Sphinx, and his face appeared carved in bronze. Moreton, aghast at the unexpectedness of the revelation, felt the poignancy of the moment.

"Are you prepared to affirm that statement?" Serge spoke in the same gentle voice, for he saw the words were uttered on impulse. He looked into the brown eyes with a little glance of understanding, and she was grateful for the sympathy expressed in them.

"I cannot give you proof," she answered quickly, "because I do not think proof exists, but I know my suspicions are correct. Stephen is a beast, and we are all afraid of him. He has no mercy, honour, or family pride, and he has been jealous of Philip for ages, nursing that hatred ever since they were boys. He hated Philip with all his soul, and I think he hates him now when he is silent in death. You do not know what it is to hate with an undying hate, but Stephen does, for he is a devil incarnate!" . . . She spoke with vehemence, her voice rising in a mad torrent of anger, her whole body trembling with the fury of her words.

Serge waited until the outburst had finished. When he spoke his voice was more sympathetic than ever.

Moreton wondered if the girl had lost her reason with the shock of the crime? Were her words those of a demented woman who is going insane?

"I am sorry I asked that question," Serge continued with an air of apology. "I can see you are distraught, Lady Merrivale, and perhaps you are distorting matters out of all proportion to reality. One's mind gets unhinged with a terrific shock of this kind, and in a few days you may regret what you have said in an unguarded moment. Seriously, you have no proof of any kind against Stephen Merrivale?"

Something in his voice caused the ice to break, and the anger melted from the lovely face. The next second she had broken down completely. She was crying bitterly, crying for the first time since the tragedy had occurred. Moreton moved on one foot, and had he obeyed his desire, he would have rushed from the room. He hated to see a woman in tears, and this girl's passionate grief moved him more than he cared to confess.

Serge was made of sterner stuff. He simply waited until the girl had regained control, because there were more questions to ask and there was no time for delay.

"You are right in saying I have no proof against Stephen," she murmured. "It was idiotic of me to speak like that, Mr. Serge, idiotic to make an accusation of that kind without evidence, but you do not understand everything. You do not realise what Merrivale Hall is like, nor what has been going on in this house for years. It is an abode of hate—terrible, bitter hate. We all hate each other, and

if you went into that dining-room at present, you would get the surprise of your life. No one talks in that dining-room; we are all suspicious of each other; and no one is to be trusted. It is only afterwards when we break up into groups that we discuss everything, and then the hate breaks out afresh!"

"I begin to understand," Serge said quietly. "Some kind of family feud, I suppose, and the years have not softened it. But why are you all living together, Lady Merrivale? Surely this is your home? Surely you can get rid of all these people if you wish! You have only to say the word and they will pack their trunks!"

She looked at him with another glance of gratitude, a glance that conveyed volumes, but her agitation seemed to increase.

"You do not understand," she repeated feverishly. "All these people must live here, Mr. Serge. That was my husband's wish, and you will hear it in his will when it is read by the solicitor. Merrivale Hall is not mine, nor did it belong to my husband. We are simply tenants in possession, and we should all be sent away to-morrow if we did not fulfil certain conditions."

"What are the conditions?"

"I can tell you no more at present, because my lips are sealed, and because this is a house of tragedy and despair. It has been going on for years!"

"You infer that your husband's death is part of this tragedy?"

"Yes, and Stephen is mixed up in it!" she answered passionately. "They are all mixed up in it—every

one of them. They are all guilty of Philip's death. It is a diabolical conspiracy on the part of Stephen, and Philip has paid the penalty of the hate business. . . . This is only the beginning—only the beginning!" she declared with a shudder.

Serge folded his arms.

"Lady Merrivale," he said slowly, "I want you to try and be rational. Please understand I am anxious to help, but I must get to the bottom of this tragedy. I want to arrest the individual who shot your husband, the individual who murdered him in cold blood, who shot him down without a chance of self-defence—and take my word for it, that individual will be arrested. It may be a question of days or weeks, but an arrest will be made. I have fixed my mind on that. Now listen to me and be sensible. You are English and you understand what Justice means. That man lying there is your husband. You are anxious to bring his murderer to justice? Is that so?"

"Of course you must find the murderer!" she exclaimed earnestly. "I will give you all the help I can. Of course I will, but you must make allowance for the terrible environment in which we have been living. As you have only entered this house, you have no idea what Merrivale Hall is like, but when you speak to these other people, and when you observe their movements and listen to their conversation, you will understand the hate I have mentioned—the hate that seems to cling to the walls of this house. We all hate each other, Mr. Serge!"

"But why hate each other?" Serge asked, with startling frankness. Even as he spoke he was conscious of the subtle perfume emanating from the girl's clothes, a perfume that spoke of the woods and wild violets, of love, mystery, and romance. He even wondered why he could not meet her glance without an inner trepidation. What had come over him? What was the meaning of the fascination exercised by this girl? Was he not, above all things, an avowed woman-hater? Yet some glorious music was stealing into his brain, goading him to passion and madness. Even Moreton saw that Serge was affected by the girl's presence.

"If I gave you the answer to that question," she replied, "you would probably think I was mad. You would not believe it. You would think we were all under a delusion, that we had all qualified for the asylum—and I believe we have. This atmosphere is enough to make anyone loopy! . . . But that is just the paradoxical part of it. We are all horribly sane and selfish, and what is worse, we are all treacherous. We plan to deceive each other from morn till night, but I beat them all at that game!"

"How long have you been in this place?"

"Something like five years!"

"In what capacity did you come here first?"

"I was Philip's secretary, but I am a distant relative as well—a third cousin or something. We are all related to each other—that is just the terrible part of it. It is a gruesome business, Mr. Serge, and you will regret the day you ever mixed up in this affair. It is only the beginning, I tell you. There

will be a whole series of tragic events. I have a premonition of all that!"

Moreton, studying the speaker from a detached angle, was convinced that the girl spoke wildly, and for the first time he began to doubt her sanity in the scheme of things. To his astonishment, he saw that Serge was impressed by her words.

"You are not exaggerating matters?" he asked slowly. "You do not mean to suggest, Lady Merrivale, that there will be a repetition of the crime that has been committed?"

"I do not know what to think!" she said, with a further shudder. "But I have a woman's instinct, and I feel I am right. I have the intuitive sense strongly developed and, since I came here as secretary to the baronet, everything that has happened I have always imagined would happen. I had a suspicion my husband would be killed when we returned from the Continent, and was surprised he was allowed to live so long!"

Serge reflected on those words, and Moreton perceived he was subjecting everything to a fierce analysis.

"So you knew the baronet's life was threatened?"

"Yes, and we even joked about it. We knew the blow would fall one day, and there was no avoiding it. You see, we are in the grip of a mysterious influence, and if you reported this thing in the papers to-morrow, the British public would laugh at it. They would suggest our going to a home for incurables!"

Serge moved his hand through the air. "Never mind the papers," he said quietly. "I shall deal

with them when the time comes, but for the present let us concentrate on my questions. I am afraid you are evading some of them. Now listen carefully, and try and help as far as you possibly can. If I send for your solicitor and family doctor, they will both be severely questioned, and I am bound to get at the root of the matter. Your lawyer will explain everything!"

When Serge made this announcement, Moreton was staggered out of his senses, not by what his friend had said, but by the violent laughter that came from the girl's lips. It seemed to border on hysteria. It came in great peals that rang through the house, that must have been heard on the terrace itself. Serge looked stern, but he saw he was in the presence of a problem, a greater mystery than he had surmised.

"No, those two won't tell you anything!" she said, controlling her hysteria with an effort. "They are all in the plot, all tarred with the same brush, and won't utter a word to save their lives."

"But that is absurd," Serge protested, "for the lawyer is bound to speak. The Courts can make him do so, and if he refuses to speak, if he will not tell the truth about Merrivale Hall, then it will be a case for a criminal prosecution. After the inquest, he must read your husband's will, and your family doctor must give evidence. What they disclose will clear up the mystery!"

She looked at him compassionately, yet her face flushed as she met his earnest gaze.

"You do not understand," she repeated, "and I am afraid you never will understand. The individual

behind this is more powerful than you think, Mr. Serge. The mystery in which we are enveloped is impenetrable, and it will remain that until most of us are buried, then the big secret will be revealed to the world!"

Moreton could see that Serge was profoundly intrigued, that this problem had got him in its grip. He had received the stimulus of his life. Here was some semblance of the perfect crime at last—the master-mind of the century!

"You mean that both your doctor and solicitor are relatives?"

It was a bold speculation on Serge's part, but it hit the nail on the head.

"Yes, they are both distant relatives," she assented, "and like myself they are tied up with the Merrivale family. We are all in the grip of this mysterious power, and even Scotland Yard won't get to the bottom of it. This will prove one of the biggest mysteries of England, a mystery that no outside source can solve."

That was a verdict which Serge was not prepared to accept. "I perceive you are still suffering from shock, Lady Merrivale," he said, "and believe me, you have all my sympathy"—His eyes were eloquent. They conveyed a message of some kind that the girl understood, a message that baffled Moreton completely.

"You are in error," she said softly. "I never loved my husband, Mr. Serge. He was very kind and proved a generous employer, but you cannot expect me to love a man twice my age!"

"Then why did you marry him?" Serge asked bluntly. He was still under the witchery of those brown eyes, and he read in them nothing but truth and honesty.

"There was no alternative," she said enigmatically.

"You wish me to understand that you were forced into this union, that you could not exercise your own free will?"

"Yes, I had no alternative but to marry Philip," she answered in the same tragic voice. "It was arranged that we should marry, and the arrangement was carried out without any protest."

"Who made the arrangement?"

"That I cannot answer."

"It is part of the mystery?"

"Yes, it is the mystery you will never solve, and the others will not help you either. Our lips are sealed. Philip was fond of me, of course, and I was always a great aid to him in his work—he looked after the larger part of the estate—but I do not think he ever contemplated this second marriage!"

"How long was he a widower?"

"Ten years, but he has been away most of that time on the Continent, and we have rarely seen him except during the last three years."

"When did he ask you to marry him?"

"Four months ago, and it came as a big surprise. I never thought that step was contemplated."

"Prior to that date, you stayed here as confidential secretary to the baronet?"

"Yes, that was my job, and I understood it

thoroughly. . . . As I mentioned, I myself am a third cousin to the Merrivale family."

Serge looked at the dead body at his feet and seemed to draw inspiration from that glance.

"Lady Merrivale," he continued gravely, "a very great wrong has been committed, and despite everything that has occurred, notwithstanding the animosity which the members of the Hall show towards you, apart from the fact that you are not in love with your husband, you will admit that this ghastly murder must be avenged. You are the one to see it avenged. British justice will also see to that part of it, and society will expect you to render all the help in your power. You can give me valuable information at this moment; you can tell me exactly why your suspicions have been aroused; and, as the wife of the murdered man—the man to whom you made certain vows at the altar—it is your solemn duty to reveal everything which you are now concealing."

Serge spoke without an atom of impatience, and with that mastery of words for which he was famed.

During his appeal, the girl moved uneasily in the chair. One of her fingers twisted a handkerchief spasmodically, and her face showed signs of great agitation. There was something about Serge that told her she was a coward, and she resented that terribly. She wanted to stand high in his estimation, and those brilliant dark eyes moved her more than she cared to confess. She was very distressed, for she wanted to do as Serge suggested, and knew how impossible it was!

"I will be quite honest," she answered in a low voice, a voice intended only for his ear. "I have my own suspicion that Stephen fired the shot, but I am afraid it is only a suspicion. There is nothing tangible—it is just a woman's instinct—but you will find I am right."

"You are drifting into phantasy," Serge reminded her, "and I want you to keep to facts. Let us get back to the moment when you heard that revolver shot, the moment you left the dining-room and went upstairs. Where were the others at that critical period?"

She laughed fitfully again.

"We always break up into groups after dinner," she explained, "which means that we all drift back to our rooms. You see, we are living here in a departmental state, each individual with a distinct suite of rooms, and we always return to our apartments after dinner. It is just like a large hotel, and run almost on the same lines. Last night we carried on in the usual fashion, Philip, as usual, going straight to the library. He spent a great deal of his time there, for he was fond of reading before the library fire, and he was rarely disturbed. We know each other's habits, and they are seldom changed!"

"But if you all dislike each other so desperately, why is it necessary to dine together? I should have thought you would have waived convention in such circumstances!"

"It is all part of the arrangement," she said mysteriously, "and we always have dined together. We all meet in the dining-room—breakfast, lunch,

tea, dinner, supper—and believe me, those are the most hateful moments of the day, for no one speaks at those meals unless it is a matter of absolute necessity. Even the servants respect our wishes on that point.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“Ever since Philip returned three years ago from the Continent. He said something one evening that caused a sensation, and from that time the silence has not been broken in the dining-room. Outside, of course, we meet in pairs and try to behave as rational beings, but it is a difficult process, and life at the Hall is just one long nightmare!”

“But how do you amuse yourselves? Surely you do not keep eternally to the precincts of Merrivale Hall?”

“Most of the time,” was the cautious answer. “We are at liberty of course to go and return when we like—in that respect our freedom is not curtailed in the slightest—but we always find it better to remain at the Hall.”

“You visit London and go to theatres and dances?”

“At rare intervals. Indeed, you will find us an eccentric group of people, and when you get to know us a little better, Mr. Serge, you will dislike us as thoroughly as we hate each other.”

“There may be an exception,” he said significantly, and she coloured violently. “But you go motor-rides, play tennis and squash rackets, entertain and visit crowds of people? Surely you have not turned this beautiful place into a hermitage?”

“We have practically done that,” she confessed,

“and as regards those other things you mention, we rarely indulge in any of those pastimes. It is true we go occasional motor-rides, and sometimes we pay a hurried visit to a neighbouring town, but there seems to be a general disposition to remain at the Hall, a disposition which we all understand. Not that we have any extraordinary love for the place, but it exercises a fascination we cannot resist!”

“I fear I am terribly dense!”

“The scenery and surroundings are beautiful,” she explained, “and as doubtless you have observed, we are living in an environment of peace and luxury. Nothing could surpass the beauty of the estate, which you can see for yourself in the sunlight to-morrow, and the Hall is probably the most stylishly furnished in England. We are epicures of wealth and comfort, and we love opulence and luxury in every corner. We want for nothing. All is provided—even our special servants to attend our requirements. We have spacious grounds and a large park, a beautiful lake and lovely walks, an ideal summer-house and hundreds of flower-beds, countless attractions of every kind, making life a beautiful dream of ease and comfort. Perhaps the exotic beauty of the place accounts for our mad haste to get back to Merrivale Hall; perhaps it is something else, a nameless Fear we cannot define, but always persistent. . . . I assure you, we are not compelled to reside here against our will, but we are tied in chains to the place, and it has been like that for years!”

Serge was beginning to grasp what it meant, but he continued his questioning.

"And the servants?" he enquired. "Have they all succumbed to the same exotic lure, or do you find them strangely practical?"

"Most of the servants are foreign," she explained, "and we are really indifferent whether they come or go, but most of them have been with us for years, and you will find they all speak excellent English."

"You prefer these foreign servants?"

"We have no choice in the matter."

"You have protested against their presence at the Hall?"

"Only once."

"To whom, please?"

"I believe it was to Stephen."

"And what did Stephen say?"

"He explained we had no option in the matter, and said it with such an air of finality that we never raised the point again. We do not engage the servants. They are selected and dismissed by our solicitor."

"What is his name, and where does he reside?"

She laughed again—a musical laugh that could madden and torture with its absolute sweetness.

"Henry Merrivale, and he lives at the Hall with the rest of us."

"Does the same answer apply to the doctor?"

She looked at Serge tearfully. She was doing her best to explain things, yet he was getting angry with her. Her lips quivered, the brown eyes took on an appealing look. Why, she asked herself, did she want to keep high in the estimation of this man?

"No, Dr. Frank Merrivale lives at Dunseaton," she answered, "and he is the only relative who lives away from the Hall—a reason has never been given on that point."

"What is his full address?"

"He lives at 2 Cherry-tree Crescent, Dunseaton, is married, and has two lovely children!"

"Yes, Sybil adores those children, Mr. Serge!" a voice came from the doorway. "Bless her heart, she lives for those kiddies, and I am surprised she has not mentioned their existence before!"

Serge turned and confronted the new-comer.

"That is Stephen!" Lady Merrivale exclaimed, rising to her feet in great agitation. "He has been listening to every word of our conversation. He is despicable enough for anything!" . . .

CHAPTER IV

STEPHEN'S ACCUSATION

THE look on Stephen's face was distinctly unpleasant. It contained all the malignity of hate, all the malevolence of evil, and even at a normal moment the features were not prepossessing. He towered before them in the doorway, hands in pockets, legs far apart, and everything about his huge bulk resembled the truculent pose of the blusterer, coward, and bully.

One concluded from his evening dress and appearance that he had just finished dinner. Moreton saw

that those features somewhat resembled the dead baronet, but Stephen's skin was swarthy, and it was evident he had gone in for a life of dissipation. He seemed forty years of age, and nothing was more repulsive than his protruding lips and weak chin, while his brown eyes blazed at sullen intervals. There was something repellent about the man, something that awakened antagonism and resentment at first glance, and Serge had seldom seen a more crafty face.

After regarding the intruder thoughtfully, Serge addressed him with distinct coldness.

"Do I understand you were listening to this conversation?"

"Don't be offended, Serge," came the grinning reply. "Sybil and I are at daggers drawn, and she has revealed that fact to you already. Yes, I have been listening to some of your talk, and seeing a terrible murder has been committed and knowing the suspicion we all entertain of each other, you will admit I am justified in listening to all details. But I wonder why Sybil has told the truth for once? Perhaps she thought it would pay!"

Serge turned to Lady Merrivale.

"If you allow me," he said politely, "I shall proceed to ask your relative a few questions, and, as you are not on the best terms with each other, perhaps you will leave us for the present?"

He was regarding her with that steadfast look that conveyed volumes, the same inscrutable glance that baffled Moreton, and her eyes drooped before his steady gaze. Then she rose, with stately grace,

ignored Stephen as if he did not exist, and passed silently from the room. It was a dramatic exit, and Moreton was relieved when she had gone. That girl had a peerless beauty which every man had to instinctively worship.

Stephen swaggered forward as if to dominate the situation.

"What a ghastly place for a chat!" he exclaimed. "Why not come into the smoke-room? We have the best cigars and wine in Europe, so surely you will oblige to this extent? I always objected to Madame Tussaud's as a beauty parlour, and I have a horror of corpse-like bodies ever since. Much as I disliked Philip, I never wanted to see him in that state!" He shuddered as he gazed at the body, but his glance contained not the least friendly sentiment. It was a glance of aversion and enmity, and Serge noted that instantly.

However, he made no demur to the suggestion, for he was anxious to placate Stephen as much as possible, and the trio passed across the hall to the smoke-room. It was furnished in the same lavish style as the library, with a larger selection of chairs, and the Eastern carpet was more luxurious than ever. Moreton gazed with profound envy at the oil paintings, and he noted that Serge glanced with interest at the Japanese cabinet in the far corner. Serge had travelled a good deal in the East, and he knew there was only one replica of that cabinet in the world.

The fire was particularly inviting, so after Moreton was introduced, the three men sank into easy chairs,

Stephen extending his legs at the greatest possible length. He did so with a groan of relief that indicated he disliked exercise of any kind. He wanted four hours a day in some local gymnasium, but was too obtuse to see it.

"There are the cigars," he said, pushing across a box on a small Viennese table, "and the wine decanter is at your elbow."

Serge realised he would have to change his tactics, so he selected a cigar with deliberation and lit it carefully. Moreton followed his example. He had taken a dislike to Stephen that he could not conceal, but one had to be diplomatique!

"I am sorry to hear of the family feud," Serge commenced affably, "but that is outside my range, Mr. Merrivale. I have not come here to interfere in your domestic environment, but to clear up what appears to be a serious crime, and I should like your help in the matter."

"I tumble to that part," Stephen said crisply, "and I know you are the famous Serge we are all raving about, but I think it is a shame you did not interview me first. Come to think of it, Sybil only gave you a garbled account of the affair, but I can tell you much more than that!"

"You admit the impeachment of eavesdropping?"

"Of course I do, and am not ashamed of it. I had no intention of letting that vixen get her oar in first. You see, we entertain no affection for each other in this Hall, and I know Sybil has a particular animus against me. She has told you the tuth to a certain point, however, and I wonder why she has been so

straightforward. Perhaps she guessed I was behind that door!"

"It was hardly a normal course of procedure," Serge said tactfully, "but I expect you are all upset by what has happened, so we will let the incident pass!"

An unforgettable look passed Stephen's face at that instant. His features seemed to grow pallid. Possibly a thought crossed his mind which disturbed him vastly, then he made a big effort at control and puffed at his cigar. He was about to speak, but refrained from doing so. There was something on his mind that blotted out even Serge and the dead body in the library. Moreton guessed that intuitively. He was watching the man critically.

"My next question," Serge proceeded, "is with regard to the baronet. I am aware that a feud exists amongst all the members of this household. May I ask if your brother shared that resentment?"

"If you want to know the truth," Stephen declared, "Phillip and I hated each other like the devil—and I hate him now even in death!"

Moreton gasped, but Serge remained immovable as ever. He knew Stephen was speaking the truth, and he preferred that.

"I am trying to analyse this hatred," he said quietly. "Was there a scandal of some kind—a woman, for instance?"

"Nothing like that!" Stephen answered explosively. "We all know that Sybil is the loveliest girl in England—why, the Academy men are fighting every day to paint her portrait—but I never wanted Sybil as a wife. I could have had her if I liked!"

"You mean you could have taken her from your brother?"

"Yes, but I never made the effort. I have always disliked Sybil, because I happened to know her too well, and when it was arranged for Philip to marry her, I saw the poor devil had got the worst of the bargain. But he deserved it. I hated Philip more than I hate Sybil, and for that matter I hate everyone of them. I would murder them all if I had not a distaste for the scaffold!"

"There has been no money jealousy of any kind?"

"Devil a bit. We are all too comfortable and independent, Serge. We want for nothing, and the future is destined to be as comfortable as ever—a kind of Elysian dream providing you administer the right narcotic!"

"The baronet often went to the Continent. You were never envious of those trips?"

"Why should I be? I could have done the same thing, although we are all obliged to remain at the Hall, but there was nothing to prevent me going abroad had I wished. It is better to stay here, however, and much safer!"

"I do not understand that language," Serge said patiently, "but no doubt you will soon radiate the darkness. May I ask, Mr. Merrivale, why you all remain at the Hall?"

Stephen found much difficulty in replying. He knocked the ash from his cigar and glared at Moreton insolently.

"If you were a Merrivale," he said hoarsely, "you would understand everything, but you are not a

Merrivale, therefore you must remain in darkness. You see, Serge, you must grasp the psychology of the situation. This is a modern mansion with all the attributes of wealth and luxury, and there is nothing outside these walls we could possibly desire. The fascination of the place has grown upon us. We dare not leave it—even for a week! If we did, we would creep back on all fours and spend days of torment because we were foolish. Merrivale Hall is in our blood. It is part of us, part of our nature. Now do you understand?"

"What took your brother to the Continent?" Serge counter-asked.

"He had commercial interests in China, but when he got as far as Asia he always made a point of calling at the capitals on the homeward journey. He was a very determined character, and only one thing could stop him—that was a bullet!"

"May I ask to whom does Merrivale Hall belong?"

Stephen sniggered.

"There is no harm in asking the question," he said, "but I cannot answer it!"

"Lady Merrivale gave the same reply. But if you are staying here as tenants there must surely be a landlord? Supposing you are asked this question in Court?"

"I shall wait until you find the murderer," Stephen grinned, "and when you arrest that individual, the time will arrive to disclose the grand secret. Meanwhile, it is better that Merrivale Hall should remain a mystery to the outside world. You can pump us all in turn, but no member of the Merrivale household will reveal a word more than I have done!"

"That is a pity," Serge announced with a sigh. "You had dinner with the baronet last night?"

"Yes, we all dined together as usual. It is the Feast of the Love-Birds, and I call it the most moving ceremony on earth. You could hear a pin drop, for no one speaks in that dining-room!"

"What happened afterwards?"

"The usual routine, with Philip marching to the library, and the rest of us dispersing to our rooms. I strolled out on the terrace with nothing but a cigar for company, and I heard the shot as soon as Sybil. I was not so much concerned, however, but I went to the library and helped to carry Sybil upstairs."

"That was one kind act at least," Serge conceded. "You saw nothing suspicious on the terrace, Mr. Merrivale?"

"Nothing whatever except a black cat on the terrace wall. When the revolver went off I was mildly surprised, to say the least, but I thought some of the Merrivales had committed suicide. I have often thought of that plan, but I can never screw up the courage!"

"As you all dislike each other so intensely, may one presume that you carry firearms?"

Stephen grinned afresh. "It happens you are wrong," he said pleasantly. "As far as I know——" He paused as some thought occurred to him. "I have never seen the other men with a revolver, Serge, and I certainly do not possess one!"

"So you rule out suicide in the baronet's case?"

"Most decidedly, and so does cousin Frank. He is our doctor relative, and when you question him

about it, he will confirm everything I have told you. He is the family medico, and although he lives at Dunseaton, I think he is as heartily disliked as anyone."

"He searched for the bullet?"

"Yes, but there was no trace of it. It passed right through the brain, and must have lodged in some part of the room. We thought it better not to touch the body until you experts came along."

"In other words, when the bullet is found, you are convinced that by no possibility could it have been fired from the revolver on the library table."

"Quite, because that revolver has a particularly small bore, Serge, and I expect you have noticed that fact already. It was a little gem Philip purchased in Paris, and I understood he always kept it in a drawer of his desk."

"Yes, I noticed that point. Now when can I get in touch with the doctor?"

"I can get him on the 'phone," Stephen said quickly. "It will save you a special journey, and I can bring him right across in his car!"

Serge reflected. "No," he answered, "we have booked rooms at the Talbot Hotel, Dunseaton, and I shall interview Dr. Frank Merrivale on my way back. Why is he not staying at the Hall?"

"He got married and preferred Dunseaton. Besides, the Hall is full up. It is getting more and more like the Merrivale Hotel, and candidly we have no more room for relatives. That is why I do not intend to marry!" He ended the last words with a chuckle.

"The baronet and doctor thought differently!"

"Presumably, and Sybil as well. But it was a desperate mistake on their part, Serge, and I fancy they have paid the penalty. You will find us an amazing household—probably the most eccentric crowd on earth!"

"What about the others?" Serge continued. "Can you summarise them briefly?"

"Well, there's Cecil—dear old Cecil whom I positively dislike, and always will dislike!"

"Never mind the hate part: how old is he?"

"About my age. He is Sybil's brother—and oh, they are a loving pair! I think Cecil would strangle her if he got the chance!"

"How long has Cecil been at the Hall?"

"Since he left Cambridge, and he intends to stay all his life. All the Zepps in Berlin would not drive him away. He went to the Bar like a dutiful slave, stayed a few years in London, got tired of the law and came to the Hall. He has never left it, and we have all followed his example. Yes, we have all made some feeble effort to do something with our lives, Serge, but the fascination of the Hall has ensnared us. Besides, why should we worry about fame or fortune? There is no need to worry in this delightful environment. We have plenty of everything, and the days pass as pleasantly as possible."

"Yet you are not happy?"

"No, we are not happy!"

"And George Merrivale! What is he like?"

There was a profound silence. At the question Stephen's manner altered considerably, and when

he spoke it was in a lowered voice—a kind of husky whisper.

“George is a hopeless invalid,” he announced. “He is a full cousin of the baronet, but he has a terribly weak spine and has not worked for years. He is about the same age as Philip, but never goes outside his bedroom—not at least these seven years. He is a great scholar, however, and does nothing but read from morn till night. Yes, George is the most reasonable of the lot, and we are somewhat predisposed in his favour, but after all, there is a reason for everything!”

“Who is his medical adviser?”

“Frank, of course. Frank is a surgeon also. He qualified in that capacity, and has attended George for years, but no one can do anything with a diseased spine. George will never walk again. You will find him in a splendid suite on the top floor, and, as I say, he spends most of his time over musty old books. He is the brainiest of the lot. Sometimes I think he has got all the brains of the Merrivales!”

“How long has he been confined to bed?”

“A matter of two years. His spine has gradually grown weaker, and he dislikes the idea of being carried about. Finally he decided to remain upstairs and has kept there ever since.”

“And the two half-brothers?”

“Percival and Reginald? They are the two inseparables, and we call them the Merrivale twins. They are exceptionally fond of billiards and alcoholic stimulants—and, into the bargain, they cordially

detest each other. They are also inclined to a life of dissipation, and eventually I expect they will reach a mental home."

"How old are they?"

"Not more than thirty. They spent a few idle years in a Liverpool bank, then came to the Hall and have played billiards ever since."

"You have each a generous allowance?"

"Obviously, but who is going to let you into that secret! None of the Merrivales will give you any enlightenment, Serge, and, take my word for it, we are not criminals. It's not stolen gold or anything of that kind. As a matter of fact we are an exceedingly wealthy family!"

"What about Tabitha, Lilian and Kate?"

"A trio of scandal-mongers for whom I have nothing but contempt. I hate all three of them. Luckily they keep away from us men as much as possible, and Lilian, I think, would murder me without hesitation. She loves me like nothing on earth." He laughed brutally again.

"You certainly seem a happy family," Moreton observed.

"Yes, and what we say about each other is not fit for publication. Come to think of it, Philip is lucky to get clear of it all. Clear of all this hate and poisonous atmosphere. You have no idea what Merrivale Hall is like, Serge. We watch each other like Manx cats, and no one trusts the other a yard. We even employ the servants to spy on each other. What do you make of it?"

Serge rose to his feet, a sign that the interview was

at an end. "So you cannot tell me whom you suspect?" he asked, in tentative fashion.

Stephen rose also, and for a second his face was contorted. All the evil of his soul revealed itself in his eyes. Moreton never saw a more devilish face. It was the incarnation of Hate.

"Yes, I know who shot Philip!" he declared dramatically. "I have known it from the first, Serge. I have not an atom of proof—not a single shred of a clue—but *Sybil is the murderess!*"

CHAPTER V

THE INVALID

SERGE received the announcement with frigid silence. Moreton was staggered by the impassivity of his friend's demeanour. Serge could be as inscrutable as a Chinese image.

"Do you hear what I say?" Stephen roared. "Sybil fired the shot, Serge, and I will get proof one day."

Serge shrugged his shoulders. He seemed in a mood of complete detachment. "You will forgive me if I discount your words," he said, "but when I consider that Lady Merrivale and you incriminate each other I am rather inclined to be sceptical. In other words, I prefer to imagine you are all suffering from shock, and under those circumstances one is prepared to make allowance for wild statements."

"But Sybil would shoot me to-night if she got the chance!" Stephen protested. "Look here, let

me tell you something. Do not imagine that Sybil is a paragon of all the virtues. She knows I am certain of her guilt, and that I am just waiting the opportunity to prove it."

"Yes, but Lady Merrivale has made the same accusation against you!"

"Admitted, but you forget that she is an accomplished actress. Do you know that for two years she was with a London dramatic company—that was before she came here as Philip's secretary—which means she has been fooling us all along. She bluffed you a few moments ago with her tears, and she will bluff all Scotland Yard in the same way. But, by heaven, she won't fool me. I've got a card up my sleeve!"

Serge remained impenetrable.

"You are agitated by what has happened," he said dispassionately, "and I should advise you to retire early. You want a good rest, Mr. Merrivale, and let us hope that something will be revealed to-morrow at the inquest. I am going to have a chat with your doctor relative, and Mr. Bancroft should get back by the next train."

"But you are going to see the others?"

"Not to-night. You all want peace, and I cannot believe you dislike each other so much. After all, that man lying in the next room is your brother!"

Stephen nodded, and something like a sob entered his voice.

"You are right in one sense," he said slowly, "but you don't understand what has been going on at Merrivale Hall. I tell you it is a house of lies and

intrigue, and Philip's death has made no difference. God forgive me, he made me hate him when he was alive, and I cannot tear it out of my heart. It is there—a great burning hate for everyone at Merrivale Hall, and for Sybil more than anyone else!”

“You may regret those words in the days to come,” Serge said slowly. “Besides, they are not true. You are all victims of a terrible environment which you have created for yourselves—and it has been a tragic mistake for you all to live at this place. You continually react on each other's nerves, and the longer you remain the more thoroughly will you dislike each other. It is a sub-human arrangement, and you are all bound to suffer. You ought to have varied interests in life. A group of relatives cannot sojourn in a hermitage, and to attempt to do so is asking for more than human nature can stand. Possibly this crime will be the climax to that environment!”

Stephen shook his head with dogged obstinacy. “You are on the wrong track,” he said quietly. “We all know what we are doing, and we could leave Merrivale Hall to-night if we so desired. We are not prisoners of Fate as you imagine. It is simply our wish to remain at the Hall, to spend our lives and die here if necessary, and we have all come to the same irrevocable decision.”

“Well, I must get along now and have a chat with the doctor.”

“But you are on a fool's errand,” Stephen said, with an unpleasant laugh. “Frank will tell you nothing—nothing whatever—nothing you do not know already. His lips are sealed like the rest of us,

which means that you have landed on a first-class mystery, and all the experts in the world won't get to the bottom of it. Listen to me, Serge, I tell you, man to man, that I know who committed the murder, and what is more, I am going to prove it inside fourteen hours!"

Serge regarded him with a curious sternness. He was thinking of a pair of brown eyes that had gazed at him with a sudden tenderness.

"You are going to present me with the revolver from which the shot was fired?" he asked.

There was a dramatic silence, and Moreton almost heard his own heart beating.

"Sybil has got the revolver in her room," Stephen said, with iron determination, "and I am going to make my plans to get it. Then you will know that I am right—then I will prove that she is the murderess!"

"But you have never seen a revolver in her possession?"

"No, but you don't know Sybil as I do. That makes all the difference, my criminological friend. Sybil is the most cunning member of her species and diabolically cruel into the bargain. If you get under her spell she will vamp your soul into hell, Serge. I know her breed. I tell you that Philip's death is the result of her scheming and evil mind!"

"You mean the baronet's death was necessary to her plans?"

"Quite, but that is part of the mystery, and I shall answer no more queries in that direction. Philip had to be eliminated in her interests, and there was no bolder course than a revolver shot last night.

That scheme has worked beautifully, for who would suspect a girl of Sybil's amazing beauty—not even you, Serge! Confess now, you have fallen in love with her already! Ah, I knew it. I can see it in your face and eyes. You have betrayed yourself to a Merrivale. God in heaven, can no man escape from this vamp!”

Had Serge acted on impulse he would have caught Stephen by the throat and flung him into the hall, but he retained his self-control with a fine effort.

“Let me remind you,” he said, with perfect courtesy, “that rest for you is imperative, Mr. Merrivale. Your mind is distorted with the most weird kind of hallucinations but to-morrow you will see things in a better perspective.”

Serge opened the door and passed into the hall. A French man-servant intercepted his further progress.

“Pardon me, sir,” he said humbly, “but Mr. George Merrivale the invalid wants to see you at once!”

The message came like an electric shock to Stephen. He rushed forward and pushed Serge toward the grand staircase. “Yes, you must go to George at once!” he said imperiously. “We never keep the invalid waiting. Proust, conduct these gentlemen upstairs immediately!”

“Very well,” Serge said crisply, mounting the first step, “let us see this wonderful patient, Proust. Apparently he is not to be disappointed at any cost. Come, Moreton, this may alter our plans considerably!”

"You will find me here in the smoke-room," Stephen shouted after them. "Perhaps you will want to ask a few further questions, Serge!"

But Proust was leading the way with all celerity, and both men found it difficult to keep pace with him. Moreton's brain was in a veritable whirl of complexity and doubt. He was trying to work out his own solution of the drama, but he preferred to keep dumb for the present, and Serge was grateful for that decision. His mind was hammering away like a dynamo, and any irrelevant remarks from Moreton would have been torture. Moreton was discreet. He knew how to keep his mouth shut. He would make an excellent secretary.

As they mounted the stairs they were impressed with the opulence of everything. Moreton never saw so many costly oil-paintings, or such an expensive carpet, while every room appeared the last word in comfort and luxury. The Hall, like some modern hotel, was partitioned off in distinct suites, and each of these had the appurtenances of a palace. Elaborate bathrooms, magnificent toilet-rooms, costly mirrors, a profusion of wealth. It was the abode of a millionaire! . . . Nevertheless, the soul of Serge shuddered, for his artistic sense sickened at the modernity of it all. There was no semblance of art. It was nothing but a miscellaneous grouping of objects, a heterogeneous collection of expensive items, an assemblage of wealth suggesting an auctioneer had been commissioned to furnish according to his own chaotic ideas!

They reached the invalid's suite at last. It was

right on the top floor, and Proust stood respectfully aside when he opened the door. The two men entered without formality. As anticipated, they were confronted by a man propped up in bed with pillows. It was George Merrivale the invalid, and one could see he was awaiting them with vast impatience. He put his irritation aside with an effort, however, and there was a friendly note in his voice when he spoke.

"I understand that Stephen has been detaining you," he said in a clear voice.

He was a remarkable man in many respects. His dome-shaped head suggested the thinker and philosopher, and those grey eyes held a power mesmeric in intensity. Like Stephen, he resembled the dead baronet in general outline of features, but he could change his expression without effort, and this signified great mobility of thought and temperament. Serge saw at a glance that he was dealing with an intellectual, a type he always held in respect.

"But that is Stephen all over!" he added. "Stephen is selfish and pig-headed to the bone. I never liked him, and never will. Has he offered you anything to eat? That's what I want to know!"

"We are putting up at the Talbot Hotel, Dunseaton," Serge explained, with a little air of independence, "and we are not in the mood for gastronomy at present." He introduced Moreton with a few words, and the invalid waved his hand to the chairs. "This is my secretary, Mr. Moreton," Serge continued, "and you can speak freely in his presence. I am sorry to hear you are an invalid, Mr. Merrivale. We

were going to have a chat with the doctor when your summons reached me. I believe you have something important to communicate?"

The invalid gave him a long and searching glance, and Moreton felt the penetration of that gaze. Apparently he was satisfied with the inspection, for George Merrivale chafed his hands in approval, and something like a smile passed over his rugged face.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Serge," he said, with great frankness, "and also to have the honour of meeting young Moreton. It is true I have sent for you, and I shall not detain you long, but you must try and humour a querulous old creature like myself. My spinal trouble has made me a chronic invalid, and I assure you that life is merely existence at present. I have been confined to this bed for two years!"

"But surely the ailment is curable?" Serge enquired, with genuine sympathy.

"I fear I shall be here for the remainder of life," said the invalid in a low voice. "Nothing but death can bring relief to this malady—it is spinal trouble of the worst kind—and I am virtually a prisoner in these rooms."

"I regret very much to hear it. Surely you are procuring the best expert advice?"

"Yes, I have been examined by three Harley Street specialists—they are three of the cleverest men in the British Isles—and they all confirm I shall never walk again. My spine is a useless thing without bone or muscle, and I am told it is gradually getting

worse. The agony is awful at times. . . . The end is not far off!"

"You have been much shocked by what happened last night?"

"Undoubtedly, Serge. But you know I was not altogether surprised. No, Merrivale Hall is a place of mystery, and this crime seems to have intensified it!"

"Why have you sent for me?"

"To know exactly what you have gleaned, Serge! I understand you have had important interviews with Sybil and Stephen, and all that interests me very much. Proust communicated the news. He tells me everything, you know, for he is my special attendant, and I could never exist without his help. I brought him from Paris as my confidential servant, and he is worth his weight in gold. But what have they been telling you? What new conspiracy have they formed? They are always plotting, you know, always scheming how best to thwart each other. It is a terrible environment, for, as you may have perceived, we all hate each other. I think I am the only individual who has escaped a good deal of the hatred, but perhaps I am more dreaded than disliked. They do their best to humour me, but that is because they find it convenient to their plans."

"The two individuals you mention accuse each other of the crime," Serge observed with great candour.

George Merrivale broke into a boisterous laugh. The look that passed across his face was decidedly unpleasant.

"That is just the kind of thing they would say," he exclaimed, with a philosophical shake of the head, "but their behaviour is always illogical, Serge, and I can quite understand it. In one sense I treat them like a group of children, for they seem to lose all idea of sanity itself. They have only the imagination of infants!" He broke into fresh discordant laughter and Serge waited until he had finished.

"I admit these people are living in a peculiar atmosphere," he conceded, "and seemingly there is no specific purpose in their lives. They are aimless, selfish creatures, who can minister to nothing but their own enjoyment, and that of course means a very abnormal existence. The reaction of jarring on each other's nerves, and having no definite plan in life, must be simply terrible, and I am not surprised if a tragedy has been precipitated—but I have obtained no evidence yet, Mr. Merrivale!"

"You are right in assuming such a climax," the invalid affirmed, "but I want you to understand that I am different to the others—quite different. I do not hate these people—I understand them too thoroughly for that—on the contrary, I try to act as peacemaker between them. Sometimes they hate me intensely when I do not agree to their wishes, but when I have a good talk to them, I make them declare an armistice and forget their quarrels. . . . Yes, I am the peacemaker!" A sublime look passed across his face, and Moreton was impressed with his softened attitude. Truly he was an enigmatic, mysterious figure, and one asked what sinister part he played in this Merrivale drama?

"Have you always acted in this capacity of priest?"

"Yes, because I understand them so thoroughly. To me, they are just like children playing on the sand. They have got the minds of pigmies, and if they had intellects higher than the ape they would not quarrel in that fashion and be cursedly selfish. But selfishness is in the Merrivale blood, and it will never be ostracised until Death comes as the Deliverer!"

"They are not exactly prisoners?"

"No, they could all leave the Hall to-morrow if they desired, but they have not got the moral fibre to pack their trunks and catch the next train to London. They prefer this idyllic existence, where Life seems to ripple past like an unbroken dream. Why should they leave such an abode of comfort when they have everything wealth can provide?"

"What about yourself?" Serge asked. "How do you manage to pass the tedious hours, Mr. Merrivale?" There was a touch of irony in the question, and it did not escape Moreton, but Serge sat as imperturbable as a bronze statue.

"I happen to be a philosopher," was the slow answer, "and I spend the days and nights in study. Books are my constant inspiration and delight, and without them I should be a dead thing minus animation. Some of those books are before you in that big case—not a large assortment, I admit—but if you take a closer glance you will see they are priceless first editions. When I have finished reading them I buy others and exchange them at will."

A glance at the bookcase confirmed what the speaker said. Serge perceived that the volumes were highly erudite, certainly not the kind to attract the average reader. A few rested on a small mahogany table close to the bedside. Obviously the invalid was a bookworm of an advanced order.

"You are fortunate with a quest in Life. But when you are tired of reading—what then?"

"A game of cards with Proust, or a chat with friends on the telephone, or a survey of the terrace from that window. You see the splendid view, and then I go back to my beloved books!"

Serge seemed to have fallen into a reverie. But he roused himself with an effort.

"And now about this crime, Mr. Merrivale?" he said quietly. "I presume you heard the revolver shot?"

Something like a glance of hatred crossed the invalid's face, but it vanished in a flash, leaving the features cold and serene. It was a marvellous transformation, and Moreton was riveted with interest. What was coming next?

"I could not help hearing the shot," he said dramatically. "I am afraid the murder interrupted my reading for two hours. Into the bargain, I could get no sense out of Proust, for like everyone else he was mystified by what happened, and for some time I was not certain who had been shot. Then Stephen came in great haste with the tidings, and the others followed soon after, all pouring out the tragedy in my ears!"

"Why did they all come to you?"

"They always do that in a crisis, and because I treat them as children. Besides, I understand them completely, and am the first to hear about anything sensational—the first to give advice."

"They always act on your advice?"

"Yes, and if they don't, they regret it!" he laughed harshly. Yet despite the brutality of the laugh, Serge felt he was beginning to understand the invalid. After all, it was a terrible existence for any human being to endure, confined to bed all those long months, destined never to walk again, fated never to traverse those beautiful grounds!

"And what advice did you give last night?"

"I told them to be sensible and not make such fuss. Philip was dead, and that was an end of the matter so far as he was concerned. Then I asked Stephen to place himself in communication with Scotland Yard, and Bancroft arrived here by the next train. But Bancroft is a fool, and he might as well have stayed in London. . . . I also gave instructions for the body not to be touched, and sent for Dr. Frank Merrivale who lives at Dunseaton. He came at once, examined the baronet carefully, and pronounced life extinct. Everything was done in formal fashion, and very few tears were shed!"

"And all idea of suicide was ruled out?"

"Quite. . . . But if you want the truth, Sybil was right when she told you that Stephen murdered his own brother!"

CHAPTER VI

THE SECOND CRIME

“GLAD to see you again, Bancroft!” Serge said an hour later in a reserved room of the Talbot Hotel. Moreton sat smoking in an adjoining chair, and Frank Bancroft had just arrived from London.

He was an astute individual, and several cases redounded to his credit at the Yard. The Chief held him in considerable esteem, but, as Moreton knew, none of the problems would have presented difficulty to a man like Serge. Nevertheless, Bancroft was efficient, painstaking, and reliable, the typical Scotland Yard official, and an individual who never knew when he was beaten.

He had the appearance of a pugilist, and could be useful in a tight corner. Serge knew that he could rely on him in a crisis, but he had the text-book mind that conceived ideas without originality, and in that respect he failed. In dress he was faultless, and when he had a suspicion that he was not sartorially perfect, he remained crestfallen for weeks. Moreton he knew slightly, for he had met him on a visit to Serge’s flat, and he knew his reputation as a rising young novelist.

“Expect you are badly in need of a rest?” Moreton observed, presenting his cigarette-case.

“Yes, I have been at it all night,” Bancroft explained with a gesture of weariness, “and so have

the other two men, but I am relieving them at once. The Chief has sent two more chaps down, Serge, and I have sent them direct to the Hall."

"Good heavens, we will have the whole Yard down!" Serge exclaimed, with a twinkle. "However, Bancroft, you are right. Those chaps need a rest, and you are in the same boat. After a cigar and a chat over details, I would suggest bed!"

"I intend to follow that advice," Bancroft replied, "and I am glad you booked these rooms at the Talbot. We are only three miles from the Hall, and can get there in seven minutes. You will be delighted to hear the Reading Police Commissioner has loaned you his powerful Daimler—and, thank heaven, you drive like nothing on earth!"

"I feel a bit dazed myself," Moreton confessed, "but if I went straight to bed, I should work at this problem all night. Serge, I was afraid to interrupt you in the interviewing process, but I am going to talk now for all I'm worth!"

"For any sake do," Serge encouraged, stretching himself lazily before the fire. "I think you have done splendidly. I confess I was anxious for you to remain dumb, Moreton, but you are not always bound to do that, as I am generally glad of suggestions—particularly those that do not obstruct. I think you understand all that, and I have come to the conclusion that you are sane!"

Bancroft smiled his geniality, but the effort was a failure, for he was not enraptured by Moreton's presence. What the devil did Serge mean by bringing

a secretary on this job! Besides, Moreton was inexperienced and would complicate things.

"As a novelist," he said politely, "I presume you have come along for copy?"

"That's just it," Moreton answered, "and I have got the material for four best-sellers already. You see, Bancroft, I am anxious to get in touch with reality, and think I have landed up to the neck in it!"

"I have sent Miss Villars for a holiday in Spain," Serge observed, "and Moreton will fill the blank until she returns. He can work a typewriter and do shorthand, answer the telephone and look up files, and without a doubt he may assist in finding a clue!"

Bancroft chuckled. It was a rich joke, and he was glad Serge was a humorist. Moreton would have to be endured—a confounded nuisance, of course—but there was no help for it. Bancroft hated amateurs, and this young beggar suggested stupidity *in excelsis*, which showed that Bancroft was in for a surprise.

"And now, Serge, I am going to ask a question," Moreton exclaimed. "Who do you think committed that crime at Merrivale Hall?"

Bancroft was staggered. He never met such colossal impudence and cheek. Why, even he, dared not put that query to the criminologist!

"I am afraid I must postpone the answer," Serge said kindly. "As Bancroft will affirm, Moreton, I never show my hand to the last moment. I do not mind confessing however that I am greatly mystified, but a theory has already suggested itself to my mind, and it is so intricate and fantastic I dare not express it. Bancroft would say I had gone loopy!"

"I am not so sure," Bancroft muttered. "I happen to have a good memory, Serge, and although many of your theories are incredible, I notice they all stand the test of realism!"

"This case is vastly different," Serge pursued. "I say that because there is not the faintest suggestion of a clue, and apparently every pointer has been eliminated. We are up against a carefully-planned murder, Bancroft, and I fear we are only on the fringe of the forest. There is still a vast undergrowth of tragedy!"

"You are expecting developments?"

"There is not the slightest doubt about it."

"But why jump to that conclusion?" Moreton asked. "Surely we have been surveying a drama of psychology, and that crime was the climax to a horrible environment! The baronet has paid the penalty."

"Psychology is not the only element involved," Serge answered slowly. "I perceive a master-mind behind it all!"

Bancroft, roused, sat boldly upright. If Serge made a statement of that kind, this would be the outstanding case of the century! If he, Bancroft, could only unravel this mystery, then Serge would be completely eclipsed. What a prospect!

But Serge was gazing into the distance. Through the smoke he was conjuring up a pair of clear brown eyes, eyes that had gazed up into his with such truth and candour, eyes that held him in a terrible spell. And had he known it, Lady Merrivale was thinking just then of Serge!

"What have you done since you arrived?" Bancroft asked with startling suddenness.

Serge never moved. He was a trifle irritated by the question, because it disturbed his train of thought, and it jarred upon his hyper-sensitive nature.

"What have you done?" he counter-demanded. "You reached here last night, Bancroft, which meant you had a start of many hours. What have you accomplished in the interim?"

Bancroft shrank back in his shell. He knew he had done nothing, positively nothing, and he might as well admit it. Crossing his legs and adopting a non-committal attitude, he selected his words carefully.

"I am afraid I have done little," he said humbly. "I came down here with Dawson and Anderson, placed them on guard at different points, and made a thorough search of the house and grounds. The body I left severely alone, for it suggested nothing in the nature of a clue, and I knew you would want to look at it carefully. I found nothing in the library—absolutely nothing, not even a fingerprint. Then I had a few words with Lady Merrivale, but I am getting mighty suspicious of that young lady. She is the loveliest girl in England, Serge, but for that very reason, she may be the most potential factor in the case. I also had a few argumentative words with Stephen, but he was frankly insolent and thought my presence an intrusion. Had I spoken to him longer, we might have come to blows. He has all the appearance of a domineering bully, and I dislike him exceedingly. Then I had a few words with the invalid, and George Merrivale struck me as

something of a crank, a spine-diseased individual who is fast losing his reason. He told me I would never solve the Merrivale mystery, and hinted I had not the brains of a grasshopper. What do you think of him, Serge?"

"A very interesting individual," was the reply. "Certainly he has his wits in a state of activity. A profoundly clever man, Bancroft, and both you and I should not forget that point."

"Was that your only impression?"

"No, for I had a quiet talk with him, and at the end he brought a ridiculous accusation against Stephen, an accusation without data or evidence of any kind, so I only smiled at its absurdity. As he could add nothing tangible to his statement, I left him with the best grace possible, and Moreton I think wished him happy dreams. We called on Dr. Frank Merrivale on our way back to the hotel, but he has been called to Reading on some urgent case."

"Did you see any of the others?"

"Yes, Stephen and Lady Merrivale. But they accuse each other!"

"You got no further than that?"

"Yes, I advanced another step, but it led to a wilderness of suspicion, intrigue and hate. It is a horrible undergrowth of hate, Bancroft, and the hate emanates from the walls itself!"

"I got the same kind of atmosphere," Bancroft declared, "but like Moreton there, I can understand the hate business. Those people have been living round each other's necks for years, with tons of money and no brains to use it. They are living for

nothing but enjoyment, luxury and splendour, and they are reacting on each other like scorpions. It seems to me, Serge, the baronet was killed in a moment of passion, a terrible impulsive moment when the hate element was uppermost. There was nothing premeditated about it."

"On the contrary, there has been no more carefully-planned murder for years, Bancroft, and that explains why every clue has been eliminated!"

Moreton's imagination was stirred. His brain was throbbing. He knew he would not sleep until the problem was solved—it fascinated him at every stage.

"And Lady Merrivale?"

Serge started slightly. It was an unexpected query, and he was not prepared for it. He wondered why he should feel an instinctive desire to defend this girl? Try as he would he could not banish those brown eyes from his thoughts. He pictured her ravishing beauty, her exquisite grace of movement, her alluring form, and then wondered if she was just an actress after all, a deceitful vamp like the rest of them?

"I have formed no decision," he said slowly. "I think Lady Merrivale is an enigma even to herself. The accusation she brings against Stephen is absolutely baseless, and Stephen takes the trouble of bringing the same indictment against her. Those murder charges lead nowhere!"

"If you will permit me butting in," Moreton said politely, "I think the girl suggests a path out of the jungle. Has it occurred to you that Stephen may be right in his indictment?"

Serge smiled patiently.

"If that is purely a manifestation of the hate element," he answered, "one can understand why Stephen brings such a charge. But why does the invalid advance so preposterous a statement against Stephen?"

"But why put the girl outside the realm of possibility?" Moreton questioned. "We were discussing the perfect crime a few hours ago, and speculating how such a crime might be committed by a woman. Are we not bang in the middle of such a contingency?"

Serge turned a penetrating glance in Moreton's direction. "What do you mean, friend?" he asked in an ironic voice.

"I mean that Stephen may be right," Moreton insisted courageously. "Of course it is only a suspicion on his part, but he tells us that Lady Merrivale is an accomplished actress, that she has actually played on the London stage, and that she takes part in theatricals. That is the subtle type that can baffle us, or at least send us on the wrong track. Admitted she is a young girl of remarkable beauty, but often beauty has hoodwinked the world!"

"You are forgetting the question of motive!"

"That is an occult point which you may soon determine. Personally, I suggest that Lady Merrivale was rushed into the marriage, that she found no happiness in the union with the baronet, and that possibly another man exists in the case."

Serge relit his pipe, and maintained a significant silence.

"Something of the kind suggested itself to me

yesterday," Bancroft said boldly. He was annoyed that Moreton had stolen his pet theory. "Providing we find the elusive Romeo, I think we can manufacture a strong pretext for the murder!"

"I had admitted my indecision with regard to Lady Merrivale," Serge observed, "but then we have only entered the jungle, and a lot may happen before we get off the beaten track. There is still the heart of the jungle to be traversed."

Bancroft stared in perplexity.

"Are you just theorising, Serge," he asked, "or have you got something up your sleeve?"

"I have discovered nothing tangible," Serge replied, "but Columbus discovered the New World on a theory and Einstein hit on his Relativity scheme by the same process. I have ventured to form an hypothesis, and it may develop into a concrete thesis before another twenty-four hours!"

"I have several theories running through my mind," Bancroft commented, "but they only land me in a chaotic muddle. As far as I can see, Moreton has advanced the only solution of the riddle, so do not be surprised if I arrest Lady Merrivale on the capital charge!"

Serge smiled.

"If you attempt a monstrous act of imbecility of that kind," he answered, "I shall be compelled to break several blood-vessels or proceed to London by the next train. Whatever you do, Bancroft, be original for heaven's sake!"

The Scotland Yard man was nonplussed and annoyed. What exactly was Serge getting at? What

did he imply by his veiled innuendoes about the jungle? How much had he fathomed, and what brilliant theory was formulating in his brain? Bancroft had a profound veneration for Serge's intelligence, but not for worlds would he admit it.

"You have always proved a first-class enigma," he said reflectively, "and I can never get to the bottom of your brain-box. It seems to me, you have found something of potential significance, something that points to the heart of the jungle—eh?"

"I have found nothing but hate," Serge said with emphasis. "Hate broods over Merrivale Hall like a pestilential plague, and you even see it on the faces of the servants. Even Proust looked as if he could strangle me!"

Moreton knocked the ash off his cigar. "I wish I could see the back of your cranium," he said softly. "But allow me to point out that even the hate theory has a vacuum. What about the invalid? There seems to be a prevalent opinion that George Merrivale merits a measure of popularity, and he has confirmed that impression. Now where does George enter the scheme of things?"

"I am afraid he is ringed by hate," was the stern reply of the criminologist. "If you watched him as carefully as I did, Moreton, you would have detected that George hates the whole crowd of them, only he has the good sense to guard his hatred. He likes to play the part of a benevolent invalid, and he can play that rôle when he likes. Yet even the helpless invalid may be one of the wild beasts of the jungle—if not the wildest!"

There was a profound silence. Serge spoke with a tensivity of feeling that carried conviction, and no one could ignore the words that fell from his lips.

"I think they are all beast-like," Bancroft observed, "but calling them names won't find us a plan of the jungle. I have my own idea about the invalid, and it seems to me he is just a brainy philosopher who prefers a book to a glass of brandy or pipe. He happens to be garrulous, fussy, and interfering, and perhaps too much of a dictator in that household. He can make himself disagreeable when he likes, but they put up with his eccentricity for some reason. He is the Merrivale skeleton!"

Serge nodded in agreement.

"You are getting near it," he replied, "but George is not the delightful pet some people imagine. Let me remind you he has talons of a formidable nature. You noticed, Moreton, how quickly Stephen bundled us into George's room, and how Proust flew up those stairs to reach his master? Thereby hangs a tale!"

"You are inclined to understress the environment," Moreton debated. "I noticed what you say, Serge, but if we had an invalid living with us, we should probably humour him on every occasion. I can see nothing extraordinary in that part of the mystery."

"I noticed the same indecent haste yesterday," Bancroft affirmed. "I was talking to Lady Merrivale at the time and, right bang in the middle of our conversation, Proust charged in like a sand-storm and announced his master wanted to see me at once. He whirled me away to the top of the house, and, although I protested at the outset, Lady Merrivale

joined in the hurried process of ejection. She almost pushed me from the room!"

"What did the invalid say?" Serge asked. "What was the meaning of his imperial ukase, Bancroft?"

"He merely wanted to pump me about what I had discovered. Then, when he found I had landed on nothing of importance, he commenced to taunt me with my imbecility and lack of intelligence. I was never so humiliated in my life. But he went on gibbering that Scotland Yard was developing into a lunatic asylum, and swore by all the gods of Christendom that I would never solve the mystery."

"Did you drop a hint that I would be engaged on the case?"

"Not on your life. Besides, I had nothing to bank on in that respect, for I was not certain whether you would be free, and I could do nothing without authority from the Chief. No, I never mentioned your name, Serge."

"I am intrigued with the French man-servant," Moreton observed. "Did you notice how Proust goes about like a shadow? Watching his cat-like movements, I thought he was the ideal factotum for an invalid. I suppose he carries every sensational tit-bit to his master!"

Bancroft interrupted.

"I am more concerned about this Dr. Frank Merri-vale!" he chipped in. "I tried to get hold of that medical relative yesterday, and found he had gone to Reading as you mention. He has been away two days—rather a prolonged visit for a country doctor. Now, I wonder what he is doing at Reading? Surely

his place is at the Hall at present? In the ordinary course of events, a murder of this kind would disturb a whole household. Why is he not living at the Hall like the others? I want light on that point. I also want a good chat with the solicitor, Henry Merrivale. Surely he can tell us a lot about the ownership of the property and all the rest of it? We have got a big crowd to interview, and it seems to me it's a job for several experts!"

"Take one step at a time," Serge counselled, "but make the step a lengthy one. I mean we must be thorough in our investigation. Not a single loophole must be missed, and there is no necessity for haste. I could have interviewed everyone to-night, but I do not want to arouse alarm or unnecessary suspicion. We shall continue the good work to-morrow, and study these people from every angle of criticism. I believe I am getting nearer the truth, but we are not going to attempt impossibilities. Remember my warning about the jungle."

"I suggest bed," Bancroft said in practical fashion. "I am dog-tired with all this rushing about and, as you say, we have a big day ahead of us to-morrow. I have arranged that Dawson and Anderson will be relieved at midnight, and if anything happens before sunrise, we shall get a wire first thing. The Chief has sent down Nicholson and Jackson to fill the breach, and they are both reliable chaps. Good-night. I'm off to bed!"

He rose hastily, then paused as a sharp knock sounded at the door. It was an hotel attendant with an urgent message that Bancroft was wanted on

the telephone. "The manager would like you to come at once, sir!" he said excitedly.

Serge and Moreton exchanged glances as Bancroft dashed from the room, but not a word passed between them until Bancroft returned with the terrible tidings. Even then, Serge barely flicked an eyelash.

"Good heavens!" Bancroft exclaimed in the greatest horror. "There has been another murder at the Hall, Serge, and Dawson has just rung up with the message. Stephen Merrivale was shot three minutes ago—shot right through the head!"

CHAPTER VII

WHO OWNS MERRIVALE HALL?

MORETON never forgot that ride in the high-powered Daimler. It tore through the night, Serge manipulating the driving gear like an expert. Beside him sat Bancroft in tense expectancy, every nerve tingling with excitement. Two murders at Merrivale Hall! Surely they had entered the jungle with a vengeance!

Moreton, in the back seat, remained in some kind of torpor, a thousand ideas flashing through his mind, and all he rejected as absurd. Who had taken revenge on Stephen? What motive lay behind this murderous act? Who was the assassin in the background? Had Stephen made a raid on Lady Merrivale's room, had he tried to bully her into submission, into yielding up the revolver he thought she possessed?

Yes, that was probably what had happened. She had found him in her room and there was a furious quarrel, then, fearing detection and arrest for the crime, she shot Stephen at point-blank range with the same revolver! Was that the solution to the Merrivale mystery? Moreton's brain refused to answer that query. All he could discern at the moment was the magnetic, gleaming searchlight of the motor-lamps.

From where he sat, he could make out the outline of Serge's face. He could see those tight lips compressed in an iron resolve, a rigid determination to get to the bottom of this horror. As usual, Serge had acted with characteristic promptness, and when he did make a move of that kind, his actions were swift and dramatic. Immediately upon receipt of the telephone message, he ordered the Daimler and Bancroft rushed for it eagerly. There it was in the hotel garage, sent by the Reading Commissioner of Police, awaiting their commands. Two minutes later they were flying along the country road.

"I am afraid this will postpone the inquest," Serge said briefly, "and it may complicate the funeral arrangements about the baronet. Indeed it complicates everything." Even in those terrible moments he could afford to jest. Serge was like that, always detached and inhuman, ever the smiling cynic.

"It is going to postpone my sleep," Bancroft said with a curse, "but we must get to the Hall without delay. Drive like the devil, Serge—like Segrave himself!"

"Yes, but don't insult Segrave," Serge protested.

"He is now a knight of the realm—far removed from the kingdom of His Satanic Majesty!" . . . Nevertheless, he beat all records, and even Segrave would have been pleased at that furious pace. They reached Merrivale Hall in five minutes, and Dawson met them at the bottom of the terrace steps. Serge sprang out of the car and confronted him.

"Where was the shot fired?" he demanded.

"Mr. Stephen was shot in the library, sir. I heard the shot distinctly and entered by the library window. It was half-open at the time and there was no difficulty in gaining an entrance. The body lay in the centre of the room, blood coming from a small bullet-wound in the temple—and a few yards from the murdered baronet. Mr. Stephen Merrivale was dead when I reached him, sir!"

"What happened afterwards?"

"The others rushed into the room, but Mr. Henry Merrivale was the first to get to my side, and he seemed to take command of the situation."

"In what way, Dawson?"

"He pacified the relatives as much as possible, answering their questions, and sending them back to their rooms. That was the best thing to do, for the women were hysterical, and the men were all horrified. I asked permission to use the 'phone and got in touch with the Talbot Hotel."

"You saw that nothing was touched?" queried Bancroft.

"Yes, sir, and Anderson is guarding the library at present. I have kept watch on the terrace, and made certain that no one entered or left the Hall."

"Where were you standing when the revolver barked?" Serge inquired.

"Just where I am, sir. Anderson and I were patrolling the terrace and keeping an eye on the grounds. As you can see, the library is a little shaded by those trees, but we observed nothing suspicious whatever."

"You two will be relieved at midnight," Bancroft interjected, "but you may have to remain a bit longer. Keep the sharpest look-out. Nicholson and Jackson have arrived?"

"Yes, I sent them round to the back of the Hall, sir; but they are going to relieve us at the time you mentioned."

"Well, maintain patrol of the terrace, and keep your eye on the main entrance. No one must leave or enter without permission. You understand that point thoroughly?"

"Thoroughly, sir," and Dawson saluted smartly.

"Keep an eye also on that car," Serge said quietly, "because we shall want to get back to the hotel before morning, and we prefer no one taking advantage of that Daimler, Dawson. By the way, have you chaps had food?"

"Tons of it, thanks," was the quick answer. "We got it at the lodge, sir. Mr. Bancroft arranged all that yesterday."

Without further parley the three men moved to the Hall, leaving Dawson standing on the terrace like a dark shadow. A man-servant received Serge with great respect, and another relieved them of their coats and hats.

"Where is Lady Merrivale?" Serge asked. The servant was a Swede, but he spoke perfect English.

"She returned to her room after the tragedy, sir, and has remained there ever since. They all went back to their rooms except Mr. Henry Merrivale, and he awaits you in the library!"

Followed by Bancroft and Moreton, Serge moved forward to the library, but paused at the door dramatically. Before turning the handle, his eyes roamed up the hall and grand staircase. He seemed listening, straining his ears, and well he might, for an uncanny silence reigned everywhere. Whoever occupied those rooms spoke in whispers, if they spoke at all, for not a single voice could be heard, and even the servants seemed petrified into stillness. Tragedy reigned at the Hall. Tragedy, mystery, and gloom, and that deep silence was significant.

Suddenly a figure appeared on top of the stairs. It was Proust. Proust in the act of descending, coming down with a cat-like tread, but he halted abruptly when he saw Serge, and then stood irresolute. Apparently he forgot something, for he suddenly turned and bolted up the stairs like a hare.

Serge smiled grimly, shrugged his shoulders, turned the handle of the library door and walked into the room. The others followed at his heels.

It was a dramatic sight before them. Nothing could have exceeded the solemnity of it. Henry Merrivale stood before the mantelpiece, a grave look on his alert, handsome face. He appeared the usual type of country solicitor, with shrewd, calculating features that never wavered, and a sparse frame that

showed he was in physical health. He had the same Merrivale cast of countenance, but he did not possess the truculence of Stephen, and seemed in one respect a higher grade. He was dressed in a well-fitting brown suit, both his hands thrust carelessly in his pockets. He started when the visitors entered, then came eagerly forward. At the same moment, Anderson made his exit through the French window. He had been remaining on guard, but Serge gave him a signal and he made an abrupt disappearance.

"Ever so glad you have come, Serge!" Henry Merrivale said quickly, with an absence of all formality. He recognised the criminologist at a glance, for Serge's portrait was an international one. "We are up against another terrible crime—a crime where not a single clue exists—where your own Scotland Yard men are completely baffled——!"

But Serge was paying no attention to the solicitor. He was staring hard at Stephen's dead body, and found it difficult to believe the evidence of his eyes. Yet it was Stephen lying there cold, silent, impregnable in Death, barely three yards from his own murdered brother! Serge stood rigid, surveying the scene from every angle of thought, his nostrils dilated like a wolfhound, his breathing restrained in tense concentration of mind. Bancroft was impressed with that attitude, and remained perfectly still. He dare not speak at that second, for he knew Serge was in supreme command, and Serge never acted without a definite purpose in view. There was every indication that he wanted silence. The silence was profound.

Stephen lay with face downward, his right hand clutching the carpet in spasmodic fashion, his head turned slightly to the left in the direction of the baronet. Serge bent and examined him. Not satisfied with that cursory glance, he made a detailed inspection with his instruments, examining even the dust on the floor, and the others watched him fascinated. Yes, there was the blood oozing from the wound. Yet death had been instantaneous!

Moreton scarcely breathed. The shock was almost a personal one. Why, only a few minutes ago they had been speaking to Stephen in actual life. Now he was lying inert and lifeless, sent to eternity by an assassin's bullet, eliminated by the mysterious murderer at the Hall! It was impossible to believe it, impossible to grasp the terrible reality of it, and Moreton sickened at the sight. He was young, impressionable, and had never been to France; this dead body brought nausea to his soul. He was in touch with reality at last!

Bancroft, awaking from his coma of inaction, moved forward and followed Serge's example. He went down on hands and knees and examined the body, taking certain precise measurements, confirming many points of reference, all with a meticulous care that spoke of efficiency. Then, baffled and dispirited, he rose to his feet, for there was not the faintest suggestion of a clue, nor the slightest trace of a fingerprint. He moved round the room carefully, Serge watching him in detached thought, but with the same negative result. There was no clue.

Serge turned with a word of apology to the solicitor.

"Forgive me not replying at once," he begged, "but we were slightly overcome by what has happened, Mr. Merrivale. You see, we were speaking to your cousin a few hours ago, and it is difficult to grasp that he is dead. Besides, a first impression is often important, and I have relied on it more than once. It is a matter of instinct, perhaps, where one takes in details quickly. Now tell me everything that happened, please."

Serge was scanning the solicitor carefully, continuing his speech until the survey was complete, a favourite trick that Moreton had already grasped. But Henry Merrivale bore the scrutiny well. He stood there entirely at ease, with a slightly troubled look on his attractive face. Apparently he was the best-looking of the Merrivale males. Bancroft also stared hard at him, almost fiercely, in fact. He knew this was the first encounter with the legal relative, and he was determined to make the best of it. He would "pump" him for all he was worth.

"Yes, it is a ghastly business," he began in a hoarse voice, and then paused. One could see that Henry Merrivale was agitated, but was it emotion or fear?

"I understand you were the first to reach the library?"

"Yes, I was going up to see the invalid," Henry explained, "and had reached the second landing when the shot rang out. I always talk business matters over with George, for he is the most sensible member of the household, and although I do not always agree with him, I am generally forced to act on his advice."

"We have come to the conclusion," Serge affirmed politely, "that George Merrivale is a remarkable man!"

"Yes, he has always been singularly clever," Henry continued with more composure, "and we have acted on his judgment since we came to the Hall. I really think he likes authority of some kind, and so we allow him to run things as he likes, humouring him as an invalid, and doing our best not to upset his temper. He has got a rotten temper, Serge, and I advise you not to disturb him."

"How old are you, Mr. Merrivale?"

"Thirty-three last birthday!"

"And Lady Merrivale is twenty-eight! . . . Well, after you heard the shot?"

"I rushed downstairs at once, and met Sybil coming up in a panic, for she had gone to the library for some book, and had spoken to Stephen a few seconds previously——"

Bancroft gave a faint chuckle but silenced himself at once. He saw that Henry Merrivale was on the verge of a confession, and not for worlds would he interrupt the coming avowal. He saw it on his lips, and even Moreton waited breathlessly for the next words.

"There was a serious quarrel of some kind," Henry continued, "and Sybil admitted there had been a furious row. She said that Stephen had been demanding something and using threats——"

"Demanding what, please?"

"Look here, I may as well take you into confidence. Stephen was positive that Sybil shot her husband, and

believing she had hidden the revolver from which the shot was fired, he was determined to obtain it at all cost—even by force if necessary! Half an hour ago he went to her room when he thought Sybil was in the library, but she returned and caught him in the act of searching her table-drawer. There was a terrible scene, an angry scene, and we all heard their voices raised, then Stephen gave up the argument and came downstairs. He must have returned to the library for some purpose, but Sybil followed him downstairs and carried on the argument. We heard Stephen in a loud voice accuse her of the murder, then there was a long silence—followed by the revolver-shot!”

Bancroft could have screamed with delight. Fate was playing into his hands, and the bracelets were ready for the murderess. Yes, he thought, he would arrest her at once and she would confess everything.

But Serge remained cold and dispassionate.

“This is all very interesting,” he said in his courteous voice, “but one asks, Mr. Merrivale, if it is germane to the second crime? I mean this: you do not imagine for one moment that Lady Merrivale is guilty of Stephen’s death?”

The solicitor changed colour. He even shifted uneasily on one foot. Then he ran his hand through his hair in embarrassment, for he knew the three men were watching him intently, studying every movement—and he wavered.

“That is a delicate question——” he began.

“Do you really think the baronet’s wife was concerned in this second crime?” Serge repeated.

"If you want an honest answer," Henry responded, "I must impress upon you that Sybil is a very clever and subtle person—more subtle indeed than you imagine, Serge. Stephen suspected her of Philip's death from the outset, and I have entertained the same conviction. I confess I had no foundation for it—no foundation whatever—but that suspicion has remained in my mind. I am positive that Sybil can account for Stephen's death—and that is as far as I will go!"

"Being a solicitor, you know the value of words, Mr. Merrivale, and I can see you have no wish to make a direct charge. This is a family matter, pure and simple, and you have no desire to bring disaster on the baronet's wife?"

Henry waved his hand impatiently.

"You misunderstand me completely," he said with rising anger. "I am giving utterance to my thoughts, because you are the brainiest man in England, and because you can piece them together. I want to tell you this, and you can place your own construction upon it: we have no affection of any kind for Sybil, not in the least. She is the most hated person at the Hall. She and Stephen always quarrelled, because he knew more about her movements than we guessed, and I suspect he knew a lot about Philip's death. Indeed he hinted as much to the invalid once, but George always took Sybil's part and he won't hear a word against her!"

Serge brightened up. "And so the invalid champions Lady Merrivale?" he queried. "How very interesting! In what way does he befriend her, Mr. Merrivale?"

"He won't hear a word against her," the solicitor repeated. "We all know he is passionately in love with her, that it is a romance of some kind on his part, but then he is an invalid and we rule out all sentiment!"

"What happened when you reached the library?"

"I found your Scotland Yard man here, and he was examining the body. He says he entered by the window as he heard the shot from the terrace, but Stephen was then already dead. He fell sideways in that position, and has not been touched since!"

"What did you do after that?"

"I thought of getting hold of our medical relative at Dunseaton, but suddenly remembered that Frank is in Reading——"

"What is he doing in Reading?" Bancroft inquired in a flash. He saw his opportunity, and a look from Serge gave him his cue.

Again the solicitor twisted on one foot, and obviously the question perplexed him.

"If you want the truth on that point," he continued, "I may as well confess that Frank went to Reading to make inquiries——"

"From whom?" Bancroft demanded.

"There is a theatrical company playing at Reading this week, and the play is called 'The Secret Woman.' It happens that Sybil formerly acted with that company, and she even took the part of the Secret Woman. Like myself, Frank suspects it was Sybil who shot Philip!"

"I know the play well," Serge commented, "and if my memory serves me right there is a shooting scene

in the third act, where the husband is shot by his own wife and the woman commits suicide. When did you learn about the play, Mr. Merrivale?"

"Frank mentioned the point last night. He came to my rooms after Philip's death, and we thrashed the matter out. I have always disliked Frank on principle, but we seem to agree on essentials, which means that we each dislike Sybil intensely. Frank hinted he had a patient ill in Reading, and after mentioning the arrival of the theatrical company in that town, he said he would kill two birds with one stone, and learn something more about Sybil. She has always been a mystery, Serge, and Frank has an idea she has another husband living—probably an actor or something!"

Bancroft maintained a discreet silence, but he gave Moreton a significant look. At last he ventured to ask a question.

"Mr. Merrivale," he said, "we are rather curious about your family—a pardonable curiosity, you will admit—but you, as solicitor for the estate, can set our minds at rest. We want to know who owns this Hall, and if it is the same individual who is making you the generous allowances?"

Henry pulled himself up with a jerk. All the credulity disappeared from his countenance. In its place, his face was transformed with a look of cupidity and cunning, and Moreton never saw such a crafty leer.

"You will have to find the answers to those questions elsewhere!" he replied with stubborn emphasis.

Bancroft was discomfited by the rebuff. An angry flush entered his face.

"Are you going to maintain in a court of law," he asked, "or perhaps to a Coroner's jury in a few days, that you, as the legal guardian of the estate, are not prepared to reveal the identity of the Merrivale Hall owner, nor the name of the kind financier who is dispensing these family allowances?"

"Why should I answer you?" Henry asked with deliberation. "I am well acquainted with the law, Mr. Bancroft, and I know how far the law can go. It would be quite a different thing if the estate was badly administered, but there is no complaint on that score. Besides, I administer the estate myself under a special power of attorney, a power approved by the English Courts, so I am not prepared to reveal any information to you in that respect. I may disclose that the Hall is owned by a Merrivale, that the allowances are remitted by a Merrivale, and that there is nothing illegal whatever about our financial affairs!"

"Who signs the cheques and pays the tradesmen?" Bancroft thundered in his most aggrieved voice.

"I do," was the quiet answer. "I pay the allowances every month, my own included, as you infer, but I am not going to reveal the amounts. I should mention it is a separate account in my name, but you will never discover for whom I am acting!"

"You will tell us the name of the bank?"

"Certainly. The Bank of England!"

"Then we have only to ask the Governor a single question and he will tell us the owner of the estate, and the source from which the allowances are drawn!"

"He will tell you nothing of the kind!" Henry sniggered. "As I have tried to explain, the money is

lodged in a separate account, and the money which purchased this Hall and estate was actually paid out of that account, while the monthly allowances are drawn from the same source!"

"But why all the confounded secrecy?"

The solicitor shrugged his shoulders.

"It is simply an arrangement to which the Merrivales have agreed," he said in a calm voice, "and all the experts at Scotland Yard will not force them to break that agreement!"

"Supposing a miracle happened and the agreement was broken?" It was Serge who asked this question.

"Then the allowances would stop!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE FRENCH MAN-SERVANT

HAD they not stood in the room of tragedy and death, Serge would have laughed at Bancroft's discomfiture. He looked at the solicitor a little more critically, and decided to take the cross-examination himself.

"I hope you do not misunderstand?" he said with charming frankness. "We are not debating the Property Act or attempting to interfere with your private affairs. Like you, we are agents of the law, Mr. Merrivale. We are confronted with a baffling mystery, and, having regard to the two terrible crimes that have been committed, we really think you ought to take us into confidence!"

Henry Merrivale was not convinced.

"You cannot tell me anything about English law," he declared boastfully. "I have mastered the details from A to Z—particularly the law concerning property—so I fear you are on the wrong track, Serge. It happens that you are taking the exterior view, without any inside knowledge of the facts, but I am behind the scenes, and I realise that your deduction is preposterous. It has no semblance of continuity!"

"You may be conversant with legal text-books," Serge continued, "but I submit you know little about the criminal side. Probably you are more concerned with parchments and title-deeds, with County Court Judges and the preparation of elaborate briefs. But I am a criminologist, a student who has devoted years to all the ramifications of crime; therefore, I think I am entitled to the facts. If you deny me that broader aspect of things, I confess I am handicapped, and you are placing a deliberate obstruction in my path."

"I pay the highest tribute to your mentality," the solicitor conceded, "yet believe me, you are far from the truth. If I answered your question, Serge, if I told you who owned Merrivale Hall and why we keep to this bond of silence, you would gain nothing by that knowledge. You would even dismiss that part of it from your mind, for it has no relevancy to these two crimes!"

"May I present another aspect of the drama?" Serge continued. "Apart from the monetary side of the question, I see clearly that psychology plays a big part. We are up against human nature, and to understand the human passions, friend, one has to grapple

with all the facts. If you will allow me to be personal for a moment, I can perceive there is a great element of selfishness at Merrivale Hall. You are all living the life of a potato. Each of you is enjoying a sheltered existence, with hardly a care in the world, and from morn till night you are surrounded with luxury and wealth. You spend your days in the sun, untroubled by the shadows, and everything that tends to discomfort is removed from your gaze. Merrivale Hall is unsurpassed as a modern mansion, with its beautiful park and lake, its immense grounds and flowers, its manifold facilities for recreation and amusement. You Merrivales want for nothing, which means you are all living in a peculiar environment of egoism, and that is not a human existence at all. Indeed from one standpoint it is perfectly inhuman, because it is the sordid care of self and personal aggrandisement. You are all tarred with the same gilded brush——!"

"Thanks very much for the sermon, but I fail to see what it has got to do with the shooting business. Perhaps you will enlighten me further?"

"I am appealing to you now," Serge proceeded, "as one man may appeal to another—across the dead bodies of your two murdered relatives—to be human and throw off this vast, incredible selfishness. You, Henry Merrivale, hold the title-deeds to this mysterious property; it is you who dispense these monthly allowances; it is you who placed that large sum in the Bank of England. You, sir, are an important factor in this network of crime and mystery, and it is to you I look, as one representative of the law to another, for help at this critical moment. . . . After all, these dead

bodies are your own flesh and blood. You may have hated them in life, but they have been shot without a chance of self-defence, and they call to you for vengeance and retribution. I offer you the chance to help, Henry Merrivale, the chance to bring this hidden assassin to Justice and the scaffold. Will you take that chance? Will you be human and give me all the facts I ask? Your confidence at this time is imperative!"

It was like talking to a stone image. The man remained detached, hide-bound by his own stupendous selfishness.

"You overlook one fact," he answered coldly. "Your plea might have been far more vulnerable, Serge, if I was affected by what has occurred. I am not in the least. I never had any fondness for Philip, and Stephen's death has not upset me in the way you think. Stephen has always proved the bully of the Merrivale household, and candidly I think it is a good job he has been eliminated. Mind you, that may seem harsh and brutal, but really it will make life much easier for us at Merrivale Hall. Existence will be much more pleasant and tolerable, and there won't be those constant rows between him and Sybil! It may seem fiendishly cruel to say all this, but the truth is much better."

Serge's dark eyes blazed. For that one second he was moved to righteous anger.

"Surely to heaven you have not the callousness to say that!" he exclaimed. "Surely you will not maintain that you are unaffected by these crimes, that you are not interested in bringing the murderer to book, that you will not disclose the information

I want! If that is your attitude, I find it difficult to believe in the Darwinian hypothesis, because there must be some flaw in the evolution theory. Some of us here in England are still living amongst the beasts, and Merrivale Hall represents a jungle of the worst kind!"

It was a terrible indictment, and Henry moved uneasily to the door. "If you have nothing more important to say——" he began.

The criminologist held up his hand.

"Do not go away with the impression that I am hostile," he begged. "I am nothing of the kind, Mr. Merrivale, and may I remind you that my offer will remain open. If you wish to take me into your confidence, either before or after the inquest on these two men, I shall be glad to avail myself of that opportunity."

The solicitor bowed.

"I understand the drift of your remarks," he said quietly, "but there is a great gulf between us, Serge. For instance, I think you infer that we are all prisoners of Merrivale Hall, that we dare not leave here, that we have no personal liberty of any kind? That, of course, is all moonshine. We can leave this place when we like, go where we like, stay away as long as we like. Our personal liberty is not restricted in the least."

Serge gave him a penetrating glance.

"Am I right in assuming," he asked, "that you must not leave Merrivale Hall for an indefinite time otherwise a certain cheque would not be honoured by the Bank of England?"

The solicitor scowled.

"You are drawing conclusions that lead nowhere," he declared. "The rest you must find out for yourself."

He was moving to the door, but Bancroft got there first and remained on guard. "Not so fast, my illustrious friend," he said with manifest sarcasm. "It is now my turn to submit a few interrogations, and you will not leave this room without my permission at least."

Henry looked distinctly uneasy for a second, and his colour changed to an unhealthy yellow. "What are you getting at?" he asked angrily, staring hard at Bancroft.

"I want to know where you hide your solicitor's office?" Bancroft demanded in clear accents. "Is it in London or Reading?"

"I have a small office in Reading, but rarely visit it, and most of my work I do myself at Merrivale Hall!"

"What is the Reading address?"

"You will find it at 2 Eastnor Gardens, but it is locked up most of the time. You will discover nothing there—not even a lawyer's clerk!"

Serge smiled. "Be easy with him, Bancroft," he counselled. "You forget that Mr. Merrivale has no necessity to work or type briefs. He has no dynamic beyond the energy that drives him to the Bank of England, and that, I presume, is only a monthly visit. If there is any legal work of an exacting nature to do, he has it deputed in London or elsewhere at the nominal cost of a telegram or 'phone message. It is all delightfully simple, and such plan keeps our friend to Merrivale Hall!"

"About these mysterious allowances?" Bancroft went on stubbornly. "I want this question answered without humbug. In the event of one of the allowances being forfeited are we to assume that the defaulting member is left penniless?"

"You can assume what you like, but I may inform you that a private income exists in some cases!"

"Well, supposing the allowance is stopped, are the other remittances increased per ratio owing to one defaulter, or are the allowances maintained at one figure?"

"Supposing I refuse to answer your question?"

"Then I will refer Mr. Serge to the Bank of England, and the Governor will disclose all information on the point!" Bancroft spoke the words with an air of fierce determination.

Henry saw he was cornered.

"Very well," he replied, "I will save him the trouble by saying the allowances remain at the same figure. But in the event of default, it has been arranged that the other members benefit proportionately!"

Bancroft was overjoyed at the success of his stratagem, so he returned to the attack.

"So these two crimes have added to your monetary happiness?"

"That is an insulting remark to make. I refuse to stay here one second longer!"

"But you must remain until I have finished," Bancroft replied, "and if you were the Lord High Chancellor himself, you would have to await my pleasure. Now my next question, and a straightforward answer, please. When Lady Merrivale married

the baronet, had she an allowance prior to that marriage?"

"Of course!"

"And the allowance was augmented by the marriage?"

"No; why should it have been?"

"Apart from the allowance, was the baronet a wealthy man?"

"Not exactly, but he had commercial interests in China, and those brought him a considerable sum."

"What money did he leave his wife?"

"That will be revealed after the inquest."

"Another query about these mysterious allowances. Are they distributed on a varying scale, or has the amount been fixed at a definite figure?"

Henry was fast losing control of his temper. His face grew black as thunder. His hands clenched nervously together.

"Why the devil should I answer?" he demanded.

"Because you do not wish me to ring up the Bank of England. Because you know that civility always pays."

The solicitor saw he was in a quagmire, but he realised the information could be gleaned elsewhere. "As the cheques will confirm," he snapped, "each of the Merrivales is handed a certain amount, an equivalent figure in each case, and a receipt is taken for that sum. Have you any more insolent queries?"

"Yes, a few. Has the whole brood of Merrivales congregated at the Hall, or do more relatives exist who have not consented to this arrangement?"

"They have all consented to the arrangement,

and, with the exception of Frank, they all live at the Hall."

"When did the amazing covenant take place?"

"Ten years ago."

"So you have lived in the Elysian fields for a decade. Well, I congratulate you on your amazing luck, but understand that you are not to leave the Hall without permission. The rôle of Dictator has changed for a few days, friend!"

Furious with anger and humiliation, the solicitor made an abrupt exit from the room, and Bancroft, with a strange smile on his lips, permitted him to go.

After this Serge got remarkably busy. He made a detailed examination of Stephen's body, stepped out on the terrace and looked for footprints, returned to the library and made an exhaustive survey of the walls, and finally his eyes roamed to the bookshelves. Moreton watched him with ungrudging admiration, for even at that moment he knew that Serge would unravel the problem. Bancroft was not so certain. He felt he had a better ace up his sleeve for once, and he watched Serge with a negligent stare. Bancroft was thinking out a course of action about Lady Merrivale.

Serge turned to him quietly.

"I think you had better notify the Press, Bancroft," he observed casually. "As that American president said, we cannot keep the public fooled all the time, and this promises to be the big sensation of the year. Publicity in the London papers may help a lot. As I explained some time ago, we are just entering the

verge of the jungle, and it is safer to snare this wild beast without delay!"

"That I will do first thing," Bancroft promised. "I see there is a telephone-box in the hall, and I know one or two of the editors. What is the next step, Serge?"

There was no immediate reply. Serge was listening intently. Then he moved forward with incredible swiftness and jerked open the library door. But there was no one there.

"Curious," he muttered. "I could have sworn I heard someone breathing." He turned to the others. "Bancroft, I want to ask you something. Has it occurred to you that we are being watched, that prying eyes are observing every movement in this room, peering from every picture, every book, every corner?"

"I've had that feeling from the first," Moreton declared. "This darned place is full of ghosts, and those dead bodies do not improve matters. The Hall is a huge whispering gallery!"

"You pair are troubled with nerves," said Bancroft. "I have no delusions of that kind, but I should like to choke the truth out of that solicitor. Henry Merrivale knows more than we do, and we must get to the bottom of his trunk!"

"You might also send a message to your Chief," Serge suggested. "He will be anxious when Fleet Street gets busy with the sensational news. I can see those London papers full of this case for weeks!"

"There is another point," Moreton observed. "Have you noticed how all the Merrivales desert us? We are

decidedly unpopular. They leave us to ourselves, and they keep to their holes like rats. We seem marooned here on an island of suspicion and hate. Yet possibly at this moment, behind locked doors and curtains, they are discussing every aspect of these crimes. In the ordinary course of things, a healthy family would be swarming about our ears!"

"You get the answer in the Bank of England vaults," Serge replied cryptically. "These people are sub-human, Moreton, and being hideously selfish to the core, they think too much of their own skin. They are speculating on that monthly allowance that may be considerably augmented by what has happened—and the questionable privilege of remaining at Merrivale Hall. They are not disturbed by these murders. It may upset their environment a little, but after these two men have been buried, they will settle down to their former existence. . . . It makes one wish to vomit!"

Serge held up his hand. Whilst speaking, his voice grew gradually lower, then bounding again to the door, he pulled it savagely open and dragged in the crouching Proust. It was a dramatic moment, for no one had heard the approach of this individual but Serge. His ears alone were trained to the sounds of the jungle!

"What do you want?" he asked the Frenchman quietly.

Proust recovered equanimity with a supreme effort.

"Merely to inform you, sir," he said hurriedly, "that Mr. George Merrivale wants to see you at once.

He sent me down to bring you along post-haste. He is very agitated by what has happened—very agitated indeed—and he thinks he will be able to help you a lot!”

Serge nodded with some affability.

“We shall pay a visit to the invalid immediately,” he said, “but there are one or two questions I want to ask first, and you are the individual who must supply the answers, Proust. I am sure you have no objection to giving me your view of things!”

“No objection in the least!” Proust answered without hesitation. He was still dressed in the same grey suit, his hair carefully parted in the centre, his general demeanour a model of servitude.

“How long have you been at Merrivale Hall?”

The Frenchman stole a nervous glance at the dead bodies, and instinctively moved nearer the door.

“A matter of ten years, sir. Mr. George Merrivale brought me over from Paris, and I have been with him ever since.”

Serge was watching him critically, never removing his glance, and Bancroft followed that example. The trio stood round him like figures of Fate.

“Is your employer kind?”

“Particularly kind, sir, but difficult at times!”

“You have everything you want in the way of remuneration and food? There is not the slightest restriction of your personal liberty?”

Proust never hesitated.

“Mr. George could not be more generous, sir,” he answered promptly, “and although he happens to be most eccentric, I get along with him famously.

The food is excellent, Mr. Serge, and I can go where I like—providing it suits the convenience of my employer. Mr. George is not an ideal master by any means, but I think that is owing to his terrible disability which makes him irritable very often, and sends him into the very devil of a passion. Then he is a changed individual, sir, almost inhuman. You would not recognise Mr. George when he is angry, and the others are very careful not to upset him. His health suffers for days after one of those outbursts. At other times, he is generous, sympathetic, and kind!”

Serge was delighted to hear this description of the invalid. It interested him exceedingly.

“By the way, Proust,” he continued, “has it ever roused your curiosity why all the Merrivales live at this Hall? You will admit that is a most peculiar arrangement?”

Proust shook his head with some degree of finality. That negative gesture mystified Bancroft and Moreton completely, but Serge was amused by it.

“I know nothing about any arrangement?” he said humbly. “You see, sir, the Merrivales have been living here for years—ever since the Hall was re-built—and they were living here when I arrived from France. That is all I know about it. I cannot explain why they all stay here!” Evidently Proust anticipated a query of this kind!

“What impression have you formed about them? You would not say that they were a distinctly happy family of mortals?”

Proust frowned at that question. It was obvious he had decided views on that point.

"The Merrivales are an unhappy lot, sir," he admitted, "and into the bargain they all hate each other like poison. Candidly, I am not surprised at these murders, because we have been expecting something like this for years—and this is the climax! The Merrivales do nothing but quarrel and spy on each other. They are a most disagreeable group of people, but one, of course, has to live with them."

"You are horrified by what has occurred?"

Proust gave another shrinking glance at those silent forms. "Yes," he said in a tragic whisper, "I am horrified, Mr. Serge, and I know I won't sleep for weeks!"

"Well, speaking frankly as man to man, who do you imagine would come under suspicion in regard to these crimes? Perhaps I might put it another way? Whom do you think amongst the Merrivale household could commit acts of this description? We are alone, Proust, and your confidence will be respected!"

"I don't understand?" Proust said, attempting to evade the question.

"What I mean is this," Serge continued. "You have known all the members of the Hall intimately for years. Day after day, month in month out, you have watched all their peculiarities, their little fads and foibles, their vague eccentricities. Now amongst all this group of people, Proust, whom do you think might have fired a revolver at point-blank range?"

The answer was startling and unexpected. It seemed to jump from Proust in a moment of inspiration.

"There is one individual I have always disliked above the rest, sir," he said quickly, "and I believe it is the man you want. I refer to Mr. Henry Merrivale, the solicitor, sir!"

CHAPTER IX

BANCROFT BLUNDERS!

SERGE weighed the Frenchman's words, but he was not impressed.

"Very well, Proust," he said quietly, "kindly lead the way to the distinguished invalid." He turned to Bancroft. "Get through to the Chief and come up later. Notify the Press also, and tell them we will admit one member of their Association. I have no intention of allowing a troupe of journalists to career about the place."

Bancroft nodded and made his way to the telephone-box. It was an enclosed affair, where privacy and comfort were guaranteed. Meanwhile, Moreton and Serge climbed the grand staircase, Moreton's mind a maze of doubt. He realised the jig-saw puzzle was getting more complicated, but there seemed a gleam of light, and even Serge appeared more confident than usual. After all, Serge had the super-intelligence to penetrate the heart of the jungle, and Moreton had faith in his powers of divination. Serge would get the truth at all costs.

When they arrived at the lavishly furnished suite of the invalid, Moreton was interested to see that Lady Merrivale was a visitor to the sick room.

She had changed to an elaborate dark gown that emphasised her beauty, and her transparent skin and throat were unadorned with jewellery. Yet one could see the brown eyes had been crying, and a glance of sympathy passed between her and Serge as he entered.

Serge bowed gravely, and his pulses beat time to some mad music as he met her eyes. Why was he so positive that one of the Merrivales was human? Why did this girl transport him into a positive heaven of delight? He was thrilled by her presence, galvanised by the mere thought that she was in the same room! What accounted for it!

Lady Merrivale sat on a chair close to the invalid's bed, and George was gazing at her with his soul in his eyes. One could see his profound adoration at a glance. What was the meaning of it all? Moreton asked that question, for he had noted these varying impressions, and had seen the sudden flush on Serge's forehead. Was this girl still acting some wonderful part? Was she the agent of some devilish force behind this mystery?

"What detained you after I sent my message?" George asked querulously, throwing a curt nod to the two men as they entered. He was propped up as usual with pillows, but he looked worried and was breathing quickly. "Do you know that I have been awaiting you ever since you returned to the Hall? Sit down, please, and let us discuss every aspect of this problem."

Serge and Moreton obeyed, taking chairs on the other side of the room. Lady Merrivale flashed Serge

a little timid glance, something that was mystifying in itself, then her gaze went back to the invalid. Yet Moreton caught the expression in her eyes when they confronted Serge, and it sent him into a whirl of perplexity. Had Romance commenced between this pair? If so, why had she averted her eyes so quickly? Why did she look so confused? Moreton also wondered why she came to George's room? Apparently this was an everyday occurrence, and Moreton remembered that George had befriended the baronet's wife. For what reason? Was it possible the invalid was passionately in love with this girl? If so, what game was Serge playing? Was he, too, acting a part? Serge was an enigmatic character, and Moreton knew he had always been a woman-hater. Why, then, was Serge allowing himself to be intrigued by this girl?

"Unless you have something important to communicate," Serge observed, "I am afraid I won't be able to stay long. You see, Mr. Merrivale, a speculative talk on this problem can lead nowhere, and we are anxious to get to something concrete. However, you have expressed a wish to see me, and I am anxious not to disturb the temperature of an invalid!"

"It depends where you are going to look for the data," George retorted with some irritation. "I don't imagine you are going to get much information from Henry Merrivale, because although he has control of the estate, his lips are sealed like the rest of us. I have more than a suspicion he has been blaming Sybil in the matter, but Sybil is as innocent as a new-born babe, and all that talk against her can only lead you on a false scent. Sybil is unpopular because she

keeps the men at a distance, and she only agreed to marry Philip when there was no alternative. I hardly imagine she is in love with any of us." He glanced at Lady Merrivale for corroboration of his remark, but she was staring out of the window in a dreamy silence.

"To be frank," Serge replied, "Henry has been leading us towards an impasse, and I have not the slightest idea why he should drag Lady Merrivale's name into the problem." As he spoke he glanced across the room and held those brown eyes. The message they flashed was understood by Serge alone, but that message was sufficient.

The invalid beamed. He was gratified at this manifestation of sympathy for his protégé. Moreton saw the approval on his features, and marvelled at the transformation. George was gazing at the girl as if she were the Madonna herself? It was a look of blind worship, a pagan worship before a beautiful goddess of mystery!

"Delighted to hear you say that!" he declared. "Believe me, Sybil has no more to do with these terrible crimes than I have, but she is the victim of a conspiracy on the part of the Merrivale males, and they all dislike her intensely. That is why I take her part. That is so, Sybil, is it not?"

"You can be generous when you like," Lady Merrivale answered quietly, "but you can also be illogical and absurd, George—and I like you best when you keep to sanity!" The words were pregnant with meaning, and Serge noted them carefully. What was the pact between these two? Why did they comprehend each other so thoroughly? Were they in league?

Was Sybil the helpless agent of this evil genius? Was this helpless, spine-stricken invalid a devil incarnate? Were all these horrible things emanating from his brain?

"She means that I have the very beast of a temper," George explained, "and that I am not always the kind knight-errant and saint I profess to be! That is perfectly true. I am a helpless old man, Serge, and I must be petted and humoured like the smallest child. But Sybil is the pick of the Merrivale bunch, and I only reprove her when she does something in direct opposition to my wishes. You will discover the gold beneath her character very soon!"

"I have discovered that already," Serge confessed gallantly. "Indeed I am hoping that both of you will help in the elucidation of this problem. I believe you both know a tremendous lot, Mr. Merrivale, and I am still much in the dark remember. You all conspire to withhold vital facts—and that is unfortunate from my point of view!"

"I shall only be too glad to help," Sybil murmured in thrilling tones. "It is true that Stephen and I have quarrelled since we came to the Hall, but then he hated me from the first day I arrived, and I think it was a case of mutual antipathy. I regret exceedingly what has happened, for one draws the line at murder!"

Serge held her eyes again for a spell, but his gaze was inscrutable, and Moreton gave it up in despair. The brown eyes never wavered, but the slightest flush mounted in the lovely face. She had nerved herself for an ordeal of this kind.

"Yes," he assented, "one prefers a more peaceful

end—even for an enemy. By the way, Lady Merrivale, I have just had an important interview with your cousin Henry. He informs me that you and Stephen had a violent quarrel before the tragedy! May I ask the nature of that disagreement and its eventual sequel?"

"Better tell him what happened," George advised in a low, authoritative voice.

"It is easy for me to explain," she answered without embarrassment. "Stephen retained the impression that I killed my husband, and nothing could remove that conviction from his mind. It was a horrible suspicion developing into a certainty, a fixed idea, a clot of blood on the brain. Stephen could give me no tangible reason for his suspicion, except the hate which he has always possessed towards me, and he was confident I had hidden the revolver which shot Philip. He knew that was only the wildest guess on his part, but he became insane about it, and clung to the belief that the revolver was in my room!"

"Stephen has been insane for years!" George announced in a fury.

"Immediately you left the Hall to-night," Lady Merrivale continued, "Stephen made a secret visit to my room and started searching in my table drawer. I returned too soon for his convenience, and, with my hand on the bell, demanded what his presence meant? A furious row started between us, and I expect everyone heard our voices. Stephen kept accusing me of shooting Philip, and I as determinedly repudiated that charge. I called him a liar—and something very much worse!"

"A good old Merrivale dust-up!" interjected the invalid, his features working spasmodically. Seemingly he was on the verge of a fit, and had Stephen Merrivale been alive at that moment, he might have suffered ill at the hands of the invalid, particularly if George had possessed a revolver!

"The row lasted a considerable time," Lady Merrivale continued, "and, when it was over to a certain extent, Stephen went downstairs still calling me a murderess at the top of his voice. I changed my dress, replaced the things in my drawer, and went down to the library for a book. I found Stephen in the library for some purpose, and when he saw me he started the row all over again. When I got the book I wanted, I flung him a few more denials of his accusation, and left him shouting after me at the top of his voice. I went then towards the sitting-room to see if Lilian and the others had gone to bed, and had just reached the door when the shot rang out in the library. Remembering what had happened to Philip, I got into a panic at once, and turning suddenly I dashed madly upstairs and met Henry coming down. I knew that Stephen was killed at that second!"

"You knew——?"

"Yes, I felt it rather. I was certain Stephen was killed by the same hand that shot Philip, and I could not enter the library at that moment. I just ran upstairs to tell George what had happened, for he has proved my only confidant in this house, but I got no further than my own room, where I bolted myself in and lay sobbing like an infant. Ten minutes later

I went up to George's room, and have been there ever since!"

It was a plausible statement, uttered in all sincerity, and even Moreton was impressed. What conviction it brought Serge could not be revealed. That individual was most impenetrable at times. In one sense, Moreton hardly knew what to think, but he recalled the discussion about the perfect crime, and looked critically at the girl who had been speaking. Was she duping them all, he asked?

"Yes, she has been sobbing her eyes out in the most ridiculous fashion," George affirmed, "and when Proust came along with the news that Stephen had been killed, I thought Sybil was going to break her heart. She said she would be blamed for this tragedy also—but that of course would be the accusation of a madman!"

"What was the name of the book you brought from the library?" Serge asked with frigid politeness. He seemed to be steeling himself against the witchery of those brown eyes, those eyes that held him in an irresistible spell.

"It was the first volume of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*," she answered without hesitation. Yet her glance was one of reproach. She was asking what Serge meant by his change of tone? Did he actually suspect her like the others? The thought sent an icy terror round her heart.

"That is another point in her favour," George commented. He had an intuitive sense of what was passing in Serge's brain. "It proves conclusively that Sybil did not enter the library for the express

purpose of shooting Stephen and, when you consider that she was not in the room when the shot was fired, that gives her a clear alibi!"

"There is one other question I should like to ask," Serge continued. "Would you, Lady Merrivale, permit an immediate search of your rooms?"

The girl hesitated then for the first time, and Moreton was astounded at the tremor that seized her. She seemed to be trembling as if with ague. The invalid looked at her in perplexity.

"I have no objection to you doing that," she answered, "but I should prefer the search postponed until the morning!"

"Why?" The word came with poignant directness.

"I surmise it is a woman's love-letters!" George announced with an inspiration. "Every girl has sentimental epistles, Serge, and Sybil, I suppose, wants to put them outside the pale of discovery. She has had many admirers during the past few years, and seeing her portrait has appeared in all the English and Continental papers, small wonder she has reaped a harvest of adulation from some quarters. I know you are a sport, so I suggest you perform this act of *noblesse oblige*. . . . Twenty-four hours—or eight for that matter—will hardly upset your plans!"

"I am afraid you misunderstand," Serge observed. "A certain grave suspicion centres round the baronet's wife, Mr. Merrivale—one I have never countenanced personally—but in order to clear the air, I think the search should be made!"

"But why to-night?" she pleaded. "It may seem an odd question, but it is entirely a matter of privacy.

You see, I have several things lying about—letters from London friends, but not love letters as George suggests—and I do not want them examined by your Scotland Yard men. Besides, I am positive the search will be fruitless. The revolver will not be found in my apartments.”

“Yes, I think you should postpone the search,” George prompted. “You see, it is close on midnight, and Sybil, who has had a trying time of it, will want to retire soon. She desires sleep, rest, oblivion from her enemies—and I hardly think you will intrude upon her privacy at this hour?”

“I will give the matter consideration,” Serge temporised. “I have no wish to cause embarrassment to Lady Merrivale, but I have a colleague who is inclined to be impulsive in his actions.”

“You refer to Bancroft,” the invalid said in disdain. “Why, I detest that loud-voiced, opinionated chap. He has no more brains than a tadpole, and if he is a specimen of a sleuth-hound, no wonder any human being takes to crime. Where is he now, by the way?”

“I left him using your telephone in the hall,” Serge answered with a slight smile. “He is sending up a message to his Chief, and I asked him to notify the Press!”

“Oh, confound those reporters!” the invalid stormed. “They will arrive in a cart-load to-morrow, Serge—if not in the middle of the night—and our photographs will be in all the papers. Fancy my portrait in the *News of the World*!”

“On the contrary, I am only allowing one member of the Press Association to make a report. The others

will have to be content with his version of it. It occurred to me that publicity would help, Mr. Merrivale, particularly seeing a second crime has been committed. Besides, it is difficult to prevent these tidings leaking out. Some servant is bound to blurt out the truth, and even your postman would convey the news!"

The invalid fumed, but he seemed to regain control. "I suppose there is no help for it!" he muttered. "Well, look here, I want a word in your ear. Who do you think is responsible for Stephen's death?"

"It destroys your thesis," Serge answered.

"How?"

"Your memory is defective, Mr. Merrivale. A few hours ago during my last visit to this room, you accused Stephen of shooting his own brother. One cannot reconcile that theory with what has happened!"

"Yes, but supposing Stephen committed suicide?"

"Such supposition can be eliminated at once," Serge answered. "One of our men entered immediately the tragedy occurred, and no weapon of any kind was found. The other revolver still lay on the library table, but no cartridges were fired from it. Had Stephen shot himself he would have had difficulty in disposing of the revolver!"

George, obdurate as only an invalid can be, fought hard to remove all suspicion from Lady Merrivale.

"You have no idea what a desperate man will do in a crisis!" he suggested. "Stephen could have hid that revolver in the fireplace, or flung it in a secret drawer in that room. He could have secreted it somewhere before death came——"

"That is outside the zone of probability," Serge said gently. "Death was instantaneous, Mr. Merrivale, just as in the case of the baronet, and your medical relative will rule out suicide when he arrives. Stephen was shot at point-blank range!"

It was Lady Merrivale who supported Serge in his argument.

"I agree!" she said softly. "Stephen was too big a coward to think of suicide. He would have bluffed us all before he threw up the sponge. He was always a bully and coward!" Moreton wondered if the hate was still in her voice?

"No recriminations against a dead man!" protested the invalid. "Still, I believe it was Stephen who shot Philip, and it is for you to determine who played Nemesis on Stephen. Do you really believe that the murderer is in this house?"

"It is difficult to arrive at a conclusion of that kind," Serge said enigmatically. "Besides, you Merrivales are giving me little help. When I was discussing the matter with Henry, and endeavouring to get some concrete information concerning the estate, he refused to take me into his confidence. He still maintains a mystery about the ownership, and is not prepared to give me the name of your financial benefactor."

The invalid smiled sinister-like.

"Ah," he said. "Henry knows better than to answer questions of that kind!" He looked at Lady Merrivale for confirmation of his words, but she only made a gesture of weariness. She was gazing down on the terrace, her brown eyes fixed on the distant lake. Then she looked at Serge and a wave of crimson flooded her cheeks.

"Mr. Serge is on the wrong track," she said softly. "A disclosure of the ownership would not assist him in the least. That is a family matter, a compact that will not be broken. It comprises the only bit of good faith in the Merrivale blood, and there is no connection between it and the things that have happened!"

"I should prefer that part of the mystery solved," Serge pleaded. "Why must this pact remain secret? I have an idea if all the cards were placed on the table, we would get to a solution of the riddle!"

"You are asking us to break the most solemn covenant," George replied. "It is an arrangement that concerns no one but ourselves, Serge, and as a man of honour, you must realise what a bond of this kind means!"

"May I ask a question?" Moreton ventured.

His clear young voice startled them all. But he could bear restraint no longer. They glanced towards him with interest, for his voice was strange and a trifle forced.

"By all means!" prompted Serge. "Go ahead, Moreton, and give us something original to think about."

"Lady Merrivale went downstairs for a book," he said coldly. "Does it not seem odd that a novel should be necessary in this hour of tragedy—particularly seeing the baronet was murdered only last night?"

Serge saw the query was awkward, but the girl had no difficulty in replying.

"That may seem extraordinary, Mr. Moreton," she admitted, "but you must remember that I am distraught by what has happened. I have wanted

to shut out Philip's death from my mind, and ever since I read *Anna Karenina*, I have been passionately fond of Tolstoy's works. Indeed, I intended to read all night, for I won't get any sleep until dawn!"

The invalid seemed to be aware of Moreton's existence for the first time. He regarded him between frowning eyebrows, yet his glance was not unkindly. It was even tolerant.

"Mr. Moreton is forgetting," he observed, "that Sybil had no affection for Philip—none whatever. Sybil married the baronet under pressure from the rest of us, but Philip could not be regarded as a husband in the real sense of the word. She was simply a secretary who agreed to a matrimonial arrangement, and she would have carried on the same duties afterwards. There was no suspicion of a love element, my young friend!"

"Even so," Moreton added, "I should have thought concentration on a novel a very difficult process under the circumstances!"

At this juncture a dramatic interruption occurred. Bancroft arrived with tempestuous force—his loud voice could be heard distinctly—and he was having an altercation with someone outside the door.

"You contemptible rascal!" he shouted. "What the devil do you mean by eavesdropping in this manner, eh? Who taught you this game? Does your master know of this conduct, Proust? How much have you heard and what is it worth in coins of the realm? You won't answer? Well, get downstairs, you shrimp, or I will wring your neck!"

After that the door opened unceremoniously, and

Bancroft strode into the room like a tornado! "Just caught that French servant spying at the keyhole," he exclaimed, "and have ejected him downstairs. You want to stop conduct of that kind, Mr. Merrivale, or he will be causing a lot of scandal in the servants' quarters, you know?"

George looked at the speaker with undisguised resentment.

"Do not interfere with Proust!" he said in a voice of command. "I have taught him those tricks of eavesdropping, Bancroft, and I find his information useful at times. Besides, all servants do that sort of thing, so why make a scape-goat of Proust?"

But Bancroft was taking no notice of the reprimand. He moved forward to Lady Merrivale, and his gaze was direct and challenging. Moreton held his breath. He knew in a flash what was coming.

"I have just found this revolver in your room, Lady Merrivale," Bancroft said slowly, holding the weapon up to the light, "and I must place you under arrest for the murder of these two men in the library. Anything you say will be used in evidence against you!"

CHAPTER X

WHAT BANCROFT FORGOT!

THE invalid was the first to give utterance to his thoughts. It came in a great spluttering oath, a blasphemous, ear-splitting word, and with it his features contorted, making his face

unrecognisable, causing his whole body to writhe in fury and revolt.

"You damned fool!" he snarled with volcanic rage. "If you don't eat those words and apologise at once, I will have you flung out of the Hall. Bancroft, you are stark, raving mad, and I told you so last night!"

"No, I am not loopy!" Bancroft answered with forced cheerfulness. "I was never saner in my life, Mr. Merrivale, and you might keep your adjectives a little under restraint. I have landed on the big clue of the Merrivale mystery, and the rest will prove easy!"

Moreton, speechless, aghast, knew it was the sensation of the evening, and slowly he glanced towards Lady Merrivale. She was sitting there like a figure in marble, erect, stately, composed, and even Serge was debonair and smiling. Why was he so unmoved and dispassionate? Why did he sit there with that mocking smile on his face? Moreton expected Serge to evince some sign of consternation or defeat, but the criminologist remained in an unruffled calm!

"Dear Bancroft," he said at last, "how could you be so impulsive! How could you!"

It was the reprimand of a father to an erring son, and Bancroft could not grasp its full import. All he knew at the moment was that he had scored over Serge, and he was disappointed that Serge could not take his defeat like a man. Serge had fooled Bancroft badly over the trunk case, and now retribution had come with a vengeance.

"History affirms that the Bible ass had intelligence," he answered curiously. "I am sorry, Serge, to have

stolen a march on you, but like Moreton, I suspected Lady Merrivale from the first, and I can now prove her guilt conclusively. This revolver was found in the second drawer of her dressing-table, and I came upon it in the most accidental fashion. On my way upstairs I remembered that her rooms were on the second landing, and when passing I was delighted to find one door ajar, with no sign of a maid or anyone in the vicinity. It proved to be Lady Merrivale's bedroom, and it was the easiest thing afterwards to enter and make a search!"

All eyes were turned on the accused girl. But even Bancroft was discomfited by her tranquil demeanour. Her features looked waxen, it is true, but she had been under a terrific strain all the evening, and any other girl would have collapsed!

"You are sure it is my revolver?" she asked quietly.

Bancroft stared at her with stupefaction.

"You don't imagine it belongs to me?" he inquired with deliberate sarcasm. "Why, I found that weapon in your bedroom, Lady Merrivale! You cannot possibly deny the ownership!"

"But I do deny it," she said emphatically.

"Then to whom does it belong?" Bancroft queried with an ugly smile, "and how do you explain it being found in your room?"

"The revolver belonged to my husband," she answered slowly. "Philip had two revolvers—one he purchased in Paris, the other in London—and he gave me the one he got in Paris, not to keep but to retain as a sense of security!"

Bancroft laughed derisively.

"You will have to manufacture a better yarn for the jury," he said brutally, "and if you cannot do that, your sagacity will be deplored, Lady Merrivale. I submit we are passing from the region of play-acting. Why not tell the truth and confess you shot Stephen with that weapon—just in the same cold-blooded manner you shot your husband last night?"

"Why do you listen to this raving lunatic!" George asked Serge impatiently, his whole face working in passionate fury. "Can't you do something with the fellow? He thinks he has scored over you. He is going to try to make you the laughing stock of Scotland Yard, forgetting all about the trunk crime and the ridiculous ass you made him appear. I remember that incident well, Serge. You allowed Bancroft to arrest the wrong man, then proved him a complete idiot. Why have you brought him with you on this job?"

Bancroft glanced at the invalid with compassion.

"Thank your stars for your disability!" he said, restraining his temper. "Had the circumstances been different, friend, I would never have tolerated a speech of that kind. You happen to be chagrined because your lady-bird has been caught, because I have charged your pet with two terrible crimes! Yes, you have made this charming girl your protégé—perhaps your confidante and accomplice—and if she has carried out your wishes, nothing remains but the penalty. But you are not concerned with that part of it—eh!"

Serge held up a warning finger.

"A plague on this melodrama!" he said wearily. "Bancroft, I am surprised at your credulity, and pained

at your want of discriminating thought. When will you learn that no expert can commit a blunder of this kind? I am sorry to speak with an air of disapproval, but if your Chief happened to be here at present, I think he would be annoyed at your lack of penetration."

"Surely you are not taking the side of these people?" Bancroft queried in alarm. "Surely, Serge, you can understand the significance of this find, the potentiality of the weapon that has shot these unfortunate men!"

"The trouble with you people is that you do not think," Serge continued in plain English. "For instance, you find that revolver in Lady Merrivale's room, Bancroft, and because you think she has deceived us, and as she has not mentioned anything about the weapon, you immediately jump to the conclusion that she should be placed under arrest! Could anything be more absurd and illogical?"

Moreton moved uneasily in his chair. What did this duel mean? Against his will and better judgment, was Serge making a superhuman effort to defend Lady Merrivale, the girl who had now got him in her toils? Was he trying to make this lovely, tragic figure blameless, this girl with the Venus-like grace who was duping them all at this moment? He looked into Serge's face, but saw nothing but an impenetrable mask.

"But what further evidence do you want?" Bancroft inquired in amazement. He held the revolver out in one hand. "Any jury will convict on this weapon, Serge, and I am prepared to give evidence

in the witness-box. Besides, as you know well, this is not the only circumstantial data. Lady Merrivale admits she has never been in love with her husband, and you must recollect that the baronet was twice her age. She was forced into the marriage, and the whole business was hateful to her. She would have been content to remain as secretary, but the baronet changed all that after marriage, and she determined to break her fetters at the first opportunity. She thought she would be the last person to be suspected. Yet she was the first to discover the baronet and reach his dead body, the first to rush to his side in the Merrivale household! Why did she evince such wonderful concern over a man she disliked as a husband? Why did she pretend to faint and get carried upstairs in that sensational manner? Because she happens to be an accomplished actress, because she was determined to go on playing the rôle she had planned, the rôle of a perfectly innocent wife!"

"You are logical to a degree," Serge observed, "but unconvincing!"

"Then take the second crime," Bancroft continued. "Lady Merrivale says she has always hated Stephen, and she disliked him so much she actually accused him of murdering her husband. Those two have hated each other for years, and it is the worst kind of hate, the hate that does not stop at carrying out a carefully-planned murder. What happened in Stephen's case? Henry has told us the truth in a few words. He stated he met Lady Merrivale on the stairs, actually met her coming up from the library, where Stephen was lying dead at that moment, and just a few seconds

after the shot was fired. He met no one else on those stairs, and he said that Lady Merrivale was in a panic. Is it any wonder? It takes some nerve to shoot a man in cold blood, and particularly when the victim is a brother of one's husband. But this girl has carefully planned all this out, and when she dashed upstairs a few minutes ago, she must have carried that revolver in her dress. You can see for yourself what a small weapon it is. Then, thinking herself safe, she went straight to her room and flung the weapon in that drawer. It is a single-chambered revolver, and it served its fatal purpose. She had no further use for it. Stephen was right after all. He suspected his sister-in-law retained the revolver, and he must have been searching for it when she caught him in the act. What further evidence do you want, Serge?"

George Merrivale leaned forward and drank in every word. Moreton sat bolt upright in the same attitude of rigid attention. Yet despite it all the girl remained in a state of tranquillity and Serge seemed bored to death. Only once did he glance at Lady Merrivale's white face, and his dark eyes magnetised and held. He saw she was trusting in him implicitly, placing her destiny in his hands.

"I am afraid you don't understand!" he said a little wearily. "I am not questioning your attitude at all, Bancroft. You are entitled to suspect anyone in the world, but what I protest against is your irrelevancy and want of thought!"

The words were significant with meaning, yet Bancroft failed to grapple with them. He was distinctly

curious to know what Serge held up his sleeve, and why his colleague was so confident and supremely detached?

"You speak in riddles?" he ventured, making a great effort at control. He was furious that Serge should let him down, humiliate him so terribly before the others!

"You found that revolver in Lady Merrivale's room," Serge continued, "and without evolving any theory in the matter—any original theory, I mean—you jump to the conclusion that the shots were fired from that revolver. But you have no ground for making such a charge, Bancroft—no ground whatever—unless you first confirmed that the bullets were identical with the pattern of the revolver, unless you made certain that the bullets could be fired from that weapon. You have still to find the bullets!"

Bancroft saw he was cornered, and an oath sprang to his lips. He kept it back by some wonderful restraint, but the invalid exercised no such caution. His mocking laugh sent a shudder down Moreton's spine.

"What a miserable microbe you are!" George Merrivale exclaimed. "Why, Serge has more brains in his finger than your whole carcass. I suggest you go to a night school, Bancroft!"

Bancroft ignored the interruption.

"But you will admit, Serge, that the bullets are of relatively small importance?"

"The size of the bullets is of fundamental importance," Serge corrected with distinct slowness.

"Yet everything points to Lady Merrivale as being the guilty person, and the circumstantial evidence is practically conclusive."

"No jury would convict on evidence of that kind," Serge explained. "Really, Bancroft, you are suffering from lack of sleep, and I think your blunder to-night is pardonable. You are dog-tired. You are seeing visions and imagining all kinds of absurdities. But I think you should have consulted me about that revolver. Had you done so, I would not have counselled action of the kind you took, because, until every particle of evidence is in our hands, our job is only half-finished!"

Strange to state, Lady Merrivale was the first to condone the blunder, the first to show forgiveness.

"I suppose Mr. Bancroft was justified in speaking in that fashion," she observed, "but if he will withdraw his charge against me, I think I will say good-night, Mr. Serge, and retire to my own room. It has been a most trying evening."

Bancroft sprang forward and opened the door, but an evil smile lurked about his lips.

"I regret I was a little precipitate," he said with great suavity, "and I withdraw the charge for the present, Lady Merrivale. I withdraw it unreservedly, but you will find in the end that I have made no mistake."

"I am prepared to take that risk," she answered as she passed out, a graceful, unforgettable figure of loveliness. Her last smile was for Serge, a haunting look of enveloping tenderness that made Moreton gasp!

The criminologist turned to the invalid.

"Were you aware that the baronet had two revolvers?" he asked.

George Merrivale laughed.

"My dear Serge," he answered, "I look on a revolver as I do a collar-stud. Philip may have had a dozen revolvers for all I know. To be candid, I have one knocking about myself somewhere, but heaven knows where it is at the moment!"

Moreton glanced at the speaker. What development lay behind those words?

Serge's dark eyes glowed for a second.

"Was it a type specially made for a .449 bullet?" he inquired.

The effect of that query was electric. The invalid shrank back with white face and twitching lips. He seemed struggling for breath, and even the pupils of his eyes dilated. The others were astounded at the change, but Serge took no notice whatever. He was staring at his finger-nails.

"It was one of the Smith-Wesson type," the invalid said hoarsely. "I purchased it years ago, but I completely forget what it is like!"

"How long have you missed it?"

"Something like six months!"

"It so happens," Serge said casually, "that both these men died from a .449 bullet, and I am looking for a Smith-Wesson with that calibre!"

"When did you discover that?" George gasped, staring at Serge with wide-open eyes, expressing a variety of emotions, and Moreton thought he saw Fear predominant. He exchanged a glance with

Bancroft, and both men gazed at Serge as if he was a wizard.

"That query Bancroft would like answered," Serge replied with a smile, "but I am afraid I cannot oblige for the present. That is another factor best relegated to the occult for a season, but rest assured it is something more than a speculative theory!"

Bancroft nodded. He was beginning to comprehend that Serge had tumbled across an important clue. That was just like Serge. He always got hold of the ace in the biggest crisis, and small wonder if he, Bancroft, had tried to score a point over his more formidable opponent.

"I should like to see into your brain, Serge!" said the invalid with dramatic eagerness. "Why don't you drop the mask and tell us who has that revolver at present?" There was a lurking smile about the speaker's lips decidedly unpleasant and sinister.

"I never give the game away like that," Serge responded with a courteous shrug, "but both these crimes have been carefully planned, Mr. Merrivale, and when I make an arrest—as I may do within a definite number of hours, there must be no possibility of a mistake!"

"Yes, but answer one point," George insisted. "I take it you are convinced that the guilty party is not Sybil?"

"You are quite correct in that assumption. I have never entertained that suspicion for a moment, Mr. Merrivale!"

The invalid waved his hand with a peremptory movement of dismissal.

"You may go, gentlemen," he said with great weariness. "My spine is giving me a tremendous lot of pain, and I must send for Dr. Frank Merrivale first thing in the morning. But, Serge, a thousand thanks before you go. I am indebted for your assurance concerning Sybil. You have made me very happy indeed!"

When Serge and his friends returned to the smoke-room, he turned to Bancroft with a slight smile.

"I found one of those .449 bullets!" he said with a grim smile.

CHAPTER XI

A TERRIBLE DISCLOSURE!

BANCROFT wanted to ask a question, but Serge stopped him with an imperious gesture.

"I know what is on your lips," he said quietly, "but I must ask you to postpone your query for the present. Meanwhile——" He bounded across the room, opened the door with startling suddenness, and dragged in the crouching Proust.

"I am really sorry, sir——!" began the Frenchman apologetically.

"Proust," said Serge sternly, "who taught you to walk in that fashion? Your steps are feline and cat-like. You walk like a creature of the jungle. Pit-pat, pit-pat. So! Fortunately, I have trained my ears to a delicate keenness—it is most essential in the profession I have adopted—and so I have been expecting your arrival. You never fail in the art of eaves-

dropping, Proust. You are an expert listener. If you could demonstrate those powers, you would make your fortune with the British Broadcasting Company!"

The Frenchman hid his discomfiture superbly. He saw Bancroft and Moreton glaring at him with undisguised contempt, but he shrugged his shoulders with supreme indifference. The situation appealed to him vastly. He was something of importance, and so he gave a bland smile.

"You must thank Mr. George Merrivale for my training," he observed. "He tells me it is my duty to bring him all information, Mr. Serge, and that explains why Mr. Bancroft caught me upstairs a few minutes ago. I do not do this thing deliberately. I must keep in touch with everything going on at the Hall, and my employer has given me definite instructions in the matter."

Serge looked at him critically.

"It is fortunate, Proust, that your master condones your offence," he commented; "but you can hardly expect others to condone it. Are you aware that spying is an objectionable offence in England, that interfering in other people's concerns is hotly resented?"

"I have already apologised," Proust reminded him, "but why pour out all the vials of wrath on me, sir? They all do it in this house. Merrivale Hall is a place of spies, all the servants spying on each other, all bringing tales to their respective employer. They have been doing that sort of thing for years, and I am no worse than the others!"

"So I perceive," Serge replied. "Well, Proust, let me warn you definitely that I object to it in my

case. I happen to be engaged in a task that does not require interference, and you must understand that you have taken a great liberty. If this conduct is repeated, I shall hand you over to the mercy of Mr. Bancroft, and he may not be so gentle as you think!"

"I will certainly give him a hiding," Bancroft promised, and the Frenchman winced. He had no desire for castigation of this kind.

"It will not occur again," he said humbly. "May I go now?"

"One moment," Serge said thoughtfully. "Do I understand you were sent by Mr. George Merrivale to spy on my movements, to listen to everything said in this room?"

"Those were my instructions, sir," Proust answered without hesitation. "As you know, Mr. George has been a bed-ridden invalid for years, and he is apt to be eccentric and suspicious. He likes to govern everyone at Merrivale Hall, and he always seems to be suspecting treachery. He thinks the others are planning to outwit him, and that is why he keeps conversant with every detail. I admit it is a humiliating task for me, sir, but I have my orders to bring all the news upstairs!"

"Well, Proust," Serge continued, "it is my wish for you to remain in that corner a few minutes, and you must stay there until I give permission to leave. I am now going to interview three more of the Merrivale family, and if you desire, you can report the conversation later to your august master."

Proust shifted uneasily on one foot.

"Are you going to interview Miss Tabitha, Lilian and Kate? he asked. "If so, you will find the three of them in the sitting-room—the red room we call it—but they are talking to Mr. Henry Merrivale, sir. He is debating every point of the latest murder, and he appears to have great influence with them. You see, Mr. Serge, he happens to be the family solicitor, and they hold him in considerable dread. It is a funny household!"

"There is something else on your mind, Proust?" Serge queried. "What is it you want to say?"

"It is about Miss Tabitha, sir," Proust answered in hesitating fashion. "She is very difficult, Mr. Serge. I should like to explain that!"

"It seems to me they are all very difficult," Serge commented, "but go ahead. What is the peculiarity about Tabitha?"

"She is Lady Merrivale's sister," Proust proceeded, "and I am afraid she is a mental case, sir. She is certainly not normal or rational at times, and that is the general impression in this house. She is five years older than the baronet's wife, and I did hear she had a bad love disappointment which may have affected her brain. She has delusions, Mr. Serge, and they make her very unreliable."

Bancroft and Moreton exchanged glances. What strange, dramatic part was Tabitha playing in this house of mystery? How far was Tabitha concerned with the two murders?

"Thank you for that hint, Proust," Serge said quietly. "It is exceedingly kind of you to pass on this warning. However, we are going to risk an

interview of some kind, so I shall be glad, Bancroft, if you will ask those three young ladies to step inside."

It took Bancroft only a few seconds to carry out this request, and he introduced each girl in turn. "I spoke to them last night, Serge," he explained, "and they are very anxious to have a talk with you about this business."

Serge ran his eye over the new-comers, then, with his usual courtesy, he motioned to chairs and asked them to be seated. He observed that Tabitha resembled Lady Merrivale to a degree, but an ugly scar disfigured the left side of her forehead, an accident that occurred in the hunting-field some years ago. Her eyes had an unsettled gleam, but they were honest eyes, and Serge saw she was a victim of neurosis. The pallor of her features seemed habitual, and her black dress accentuated that pallor. She was certainly an interesting personality, and Serge was predisposed in her favour, but he would not admit the fact to himself. He was still haunted by Lady Merrivale's brown eyes, and something was urging him, for her sake, to get this mystery solved within a definite number of hours.

"Be seated, ladies," he said in his most gallant manner. "I know it is getting late and you all wish to retire, but I have a formidable task in front of me, and I know you are very anxious to help."

He ran his eye over the other two girls. Lilian seemed a spirited young lady of twenty-five, her whole demeanour signifying verve and purpose. She was of the vivacious type, with great vitality and pluck. Kate Merrivale was a strange contrast.

She was apathetic, anæmic, low-spirited. She was the baronet's younger sister, and her attitude was utterly listless. In her mourning dress she looked a pathetic figure, and one could see she was brooding over the tragedy that prevailed. Yet how antagonistic they seemed. They sat not as relatives but strangers, strangers who disliked each other, and the hate was written on their faces. Their eyes contained enmity and mutual distrust.

"I understand you have been discussing matters with Mr. Henry Merrivale," Serge continued. "I presume you were all in that sitting-room when the last revolver-shot was fired?"

"That is entirely wrong," Lilian said with something like a snigger. "We all rushed into that room after, and Henry came to discuss the matter. But we went to our rooms after your first visit, Mr. Serge, as we had no desire for a friendly chat with each other. As you may have noticed, sentiment is not a conspicuous quality at Merrivale Hall, so I went direct to my room when you departed. The others will explain their movements." She sent a glance of malevolence towards Tabitha, a glance that reeked of hate and intolerance, and Serge was taken aback 'by that fierce glance of hostility.

He turned to Kate Merrivale.

"I presume you did the same thing," he observed, "and heard the shot fired from your bedroom?"

"Yes, I heard the shot distinctly," Kate answered in a listless voice. She seemed to stare at Lilian with uncertainty, and wondered if she had said too much already!

Serge directed his gaze to Tabitha. She was looking at him with the simplicity of a child.

"And what about you, Miss Tabitha?" he asked gently. "Were you in your room when the shot was fired?"

"Yes, I went upstairs with the others," Tabitha answered slowly. "I was dazed with the excitement of it all, and have had no sleep for several nights!"

"Did you notice Lady Merrivale returning to her rooms at that time?"

It would be difficult to describe the effect of the question. Even Bancroft and Moreton were electrified by what occurred. It was just as if Serge had released some secret poison valve, something that disseminated all the hate of the Merrivale household, a hate concentrating itself on the faces of these three girls. Evil glances flashed between them, glances where enmity, suspicion, jealousy struggled for supremacy. It was Lilian, strange to state, who answered that question.

"We are throwing no bouquets about Sybil!" she said with downright frankness. "We are not on speaking terms with that individual, Mr. Serge, and believe me, we much prefer that arrangement!"

"I was not referring to the family feud," Serge said significantly, "I am aware of the bitterness that exists at Merrivale Hall, Miss Lilian—a most regrettable circumstance—but I was speculating on the movements of Lady Merrivale. Can you enlighten me to any degree at least?"

"We have nothing to do with Sybil!" Lilian answered doggedly. "She keeps avoiding us like the

pestilence, and we pay her the same compliment. Kate and Tabitha will confirm what I'm saying—and Tabitha, who is her own sister, would poison her if she got the chance. Yes, I mean it. No one has ever understood Sybil, and she prefers to maintain that element of mystery."

Serge, with the lovely face of Lady Merrivale tearing at his heart-strings, gazed at the speaker in perplexity.

"May I ask some further mental nourishment?" he inquired blandly. "Why has Lady Merrivale constituted herself a mystery, and what is there about her you do not understand? Why do you all dislike her so intensely?"

"We have hated her since she came to the Hall," Lilian said savagely, "and Tabitha, who is her own sister, hates her like the devil. As far as I am concerned, I shall be candid. Sybil won Philip when I was keen on him myself, Sybil got to the Continent where I wanted to go, and Sybil happens to be the pet of the invalid upstairs. That means more than you think. You can take my word for it that Sybil is the favoured one in this Hall, and we all hate her for it. George worships her, and if he could get about, I think he would shoot us all with impunity. He has no love for any of us—and Sybil and he are nothing but confederates in wickedness. You can place what construction you like on that!"

"What do you mean?" Serge asked coldly.

"I mean that Sybil is the *grande passion* so far as George Merrivale is concerned. He has always been head over heels about that beauty, and he nearly

went mad with despair when she married Philip. If he was not the hopeless invalid he pretends to be, I dare say he might have disposed of the baronet. At any rate, we have shed few tears over the business one way or the other."

"You are not disturbed by the murders?"

Lilian corrected herself.

"That is different!" she answered nonchalantly. "We are all worried over these crimes, but we are not going to be hypocrites. Philip was snobbish and autocratic, and when I say I wanted to marry him I infer that I desired to escape from a terrible environment. I should have left Merrivale Hall for ever, and buried the whole place from my thoughts. But my affection for Philip turned to hate when he flung me aside for Sybil. I hate them all, and will go on hating them to the end!"

It was at this crucial second that her eyes fell on Proust. He was partly concealed behind the big curtain, but Lilian saw him now distinctly.

"What on heaven's name are you doing there, Proust?" she demanded. Her voice rose in a blaze of anger. "Eavesdropping as usual, I suppose, for your beloved employer. Mr. Serge, are you aware of this? Do you know that Proust has been here all this time?"

"He happens to be here at my invitation," Serge explained with an apology. "I assure you, Miss Lilian, he is in the seventh heaven of happiness, for he has listened to every word with the greatest comfort, and there is no need for him to strain his ear against that keyhole!"

"But we do not discuss family affairs in the presence of servants?" Lilian flashed in resentment.

"That I understand," Serge temporised, "yet believe me, I prefer Proust on this side of the door."

Lilian darted a venomous look at the crouching Frenchman.

"That is George's mouthpiece!" she declared with vigorous scorn. "He is the watchdog and emissary—the eternal spy. What you say before him, Mr. Serge, will go straight to the invalid. How I hate the whole crowd of them. Nothing but spies and continual scandal. Have you any more questions to ask, please? I am going to light a cigarette and go straight to bed!"

Serge extended his case.

"This happens to be a smoke-room," he ventured, "and I shall be offended if you do not take one. They are Turkish and non-poisonous!"

She selected a cigarette with a murmur of thanks, and inserted it between her lips. Serge struck a match, and held it to the cigarette. The other men stared in astonishment. The *sang-froid* of this girl was appalling. She would have danced if the Hall was burning!

"May I ask," Serge proceeded, "if you can grant me any further information, Miss Lilian?"

She blew the smoke slowly from her lips.

"Have you not guessed the riddle yet?" she asked with some degree of astonishment.

"You mean that one individual has an outstanding chance of arrest?"

"Yes, that's it. There is only one person who will gain by what has happened, Mr. Serge. That is the girl who was lucky enough to marry the baronet. I refer to dearest Sybil!" There was a vitriolic note in her voice as she finished, a note of repressed hate and jealousy.

"Yes," Kate affirmed apathetically, "Sybil has been the favoured individual at the Hall. She did not mind being secretary to Philip, for that gave her a further advantage over us, but she has planned to outwit us from the first day she came to the Hall!"

"In what way does Lady Merrivale stand to gain by what has occurred?"

"Is it not obvious?" Lilian asked with a sniff. "Sybil's allowance will be augmented in due course, and she has taken care to break her fetters. Being married, she is more care-free in every respect, and she will soon set off again for the Continent. Unfortunately for her scheming, Stephen had the good sense to suspect her, and when he accused her of the murder she decided he must be eliminated. It has all been carefully planned, and a woman is the last person to suspect in a mystery of this kind. But the rest of us are behind the scenes, and we know who is the guilty party!"

Serge, mentally tortured, turned with some appeal to Tabitha.

"You are Lady Merrivale's sister," he declared. "Surely you do not entertain a suspicion of this kind?"

Tabitha hesitated. The pause was for several seconds. She looked at Proust and shivered. Then

she spoke in a curious voice. "Please send Proust from the room!" she said quietly.

Serge turned to the Frenchman.

"Your report will be somewhat abridged, Proust," he said, "but it is necessary for you to go now. I will send for you again when your presence is required."

Without a word, Proust rose and made a quick departure. The others watched his feline movements. Moreton wondered just then why he could not explain his terrible antipathy to the Frenchman!

Tabitha was still hesitant.

"You must ask Kate and Lilian to leave also!" she begged. "I cannot speak before them."

Serge complied instantly. He saw he was on the track of something, and resolved not to miss his opportunity.

"I am sorry to ask you two young ladies to retire!" he said to the other pair, "but Miss Tabitha has something most important to communicate!"

Lilian rose with a boisterous laugh.

"Come along to bed, Kate," she said carelessly, "and leave Tabitha to the most famous criminologist in the world. Perhaps she will make him a proposal of marriage! At any rate, what she says is of no consequence!"

Serge waited until the pair had left the room, then he turned to the remaining girl. "Proust has gone as fast as his legs would carry him," he explained. "What is it you want to tell me, Miss Tabitha?"

"As you have probably guessed," Tabitha said eagerly, "I bear my sister Sybil no degree of affection.

But I am not certain that she is the guilty party in this instance—although she might be an accessory to the crimes!”

“You think there is someone behind her, someone prompting her to act in this terrible manner?” Serge spoke with a deep earnestness.

“Yes, you can work all that out for yourself,” Tabitha continued, “but you must not think me demented when you have heard my statement. I am going to tell you the truth, and although it may sound strange and incredible in your ears, you must believe it. I am not a mental case as the others suppose. I am as sane and logical as any of them!”

“I do not doubt that for one moment,” Serge said sincerely. “Please tell me what is worrying you? Then you may get some restful sleep perhaps. I can see you are very much distressed about something!”

“Yes, it is about something that happened a week ago,” Tabitha proceeded. “It was last Thursday when I was going downstairs for a book. Midnight had struck, so I rose from my bed, flung a wrap round my shoulders, and was about to open the bedroom door when I heard someone moving along the passage—just outside my room! I opened the door slowly and peeped out, and who do you think it was, Mr. Serge? Judge of my horror to see that the figure walking along that corridor was no other than George Merrivale the invalid! He walked without any difficulty whatever!”

CHAPTER XII

COULD THE INVALID WALK?

MORETON never forgot the weird silence that followed.

It seemed the most dramatic moment he had ever experienced. Bancroft also received the biggest shock of his life. It was just as if a huge curtain had been swept suddenly aside, because if this was true, here was the startling revelation of the mystery!

If Tabitha was right, it would mean the most sensational case in history, for it signified that George Merrivale had been living a dual existence, masquerading as a spine-stricken invalid for years, but carrying out some malignant purpose of his own, a purpose not revealed or fathomed, yet a scheme wherein he was the master-mind. He was the individual with the abnormal brain, a positive genius, in fact!

And Proust? How did Proust fit into the scheme of things? What sinister part was he playing in this drama? Was Proust the confederate and agent, or was he just a clever spy in the employ of George Merrivale?

Half-suffocated by those thoughts, Bancroft fought hard for self-control. Now he could see light behind Serge's enigmatic demeanour, behind his occult attitude towards Lady Merrivale, behind his cynicism and silence! Apparently Serge had suspected some-

thing like this from the first! Was this the card he was going to reveal at the last moment? What a baffling problem it had all been! But here was the solution, the wonderful thread that led to an unfoldment of everything! Was it any wonder that he, Bancroft, had blundered, any wonder that he, in his haste and credulity, had accused Lady Merrivale of the crimes? Why, this was the big sensational case of the century, and Serge had hinted that the horrors had only commenced!

Startled by that profound silence, Tabitha looked at the three men in dismay. She saw they were perturbed by her words, and her face went back to its deathly whiteness, revealing that scar in all its baneful hideousness. She swayed unsteadily, but controlled herself with an effort. Serge noted that fight for mastery, and when he spoke his voice was as gentle as a woman. Not a flicker disturbed the passivity of his features. He remained Sphinx-like, detached as ever.

"You were suffering from a bad attack of nerves?" he said slowly.

Tabitha shrank back in her chair, a red spot burning on each cheek, a hectic glow denoting shame, anger, confusion.

"You don't believe me?" she asked tonelessly.

"I would not be so discourteous," Serge replied, "but you do not measure the effect of your words, nor the meaning they are intended to convey. Your statement creates a profound sensation, Miss Tabitha, for they disturb many preconceived ideas. What I mean is this: I am grateful for your confidence, but

your words have no proof of any kind. You have simply given us the recital of an extraordinary happening, and it will require the clearest verification. You cannot furnish such proof—at present—therefore, although I do not dispute your sincerity, I must accept your statement with the greatest reserve!”

“I feared something like that,” she answered nervously. “That is why I never told the others, Mr. Serge. I knew they would all think me insane, and very likely they would want to send me to an asylum. They say already I am mentally deranged, but it’s not true—it’s not true. I am as sane as any of them. May I go to my room, please?”

Serge’s dark eyes filled with sympathy. In that glance was real kindness, because he understood perfectly.

“Do not think I am ungrateful!” he begged. “You have told us something that is out of all proportion to reality. Nevertheless, it will receive my careful consideration. I cannot promise to give credence to it. It is too improbable and uncanny! Mr. George Merrivale has been a hopeless invalid for years—I can see that with my own eyes—and nothing is more terrible than the spinal disease from which he suffers. It is ghastly, incurable, hopeless. He could never walk an inch. The idea of him leaving his bed even for a glass of water, or walking about that corridor, or perambulating Merrivale Hall—all that is too remote from logic!”

“Yes, but I am positive it was George!” Tabitha maintained with great earnestness. “I was never more certain of anything in my life!”

Even Moreton was struck by the sincerity of her manner. Bancroft, however, returned to earth with a bump. Now that Serge had spoken, he could see the fantastic side in a flash. If Serge could not entertain such a thesis, Bancroft was not going to jump into a wild speculation of that kind. Still, this girl's statement unnerved him considerably!

"It was just an illusion on your part!" Serge continued gently. "You awoke suddenly from sleep and opened that bedroom door—but you imagined the rest, I think. It was just an unpleasant dream—and you must lock your door in future. That plan will give you security against ghosts!"

"I always do lock my door!" she replied steadily. "All the doors are locked in this house, Mr. Serge, and I am no different to the others. I can see you do not believe my words, but a day will come when you will recall them!"

She passed from the room a mystical, silent figure, leaving behind a vague, indefinable atmosphere of depression. Serge stared into space seeing visions, developing some new, strange hypothesis! Moreton wondered what that powerful mind was thinking! Had Tabitha's words impressed Serge with real significance, and despite his protest at their incredulity had he given reality to the statement? Was there occult truth behind it all? Or was Serge bluffing as usual?

"That girl seems as mad as they make them!" Bancroft muttered, shaking himself like a big dog and jumping to his feet. "Think she ought to be mentally examined, Serge—I do really! Her affliction must be pretty bad!"

Serge rose also and looked across at the speaker.

"She seems less sane than the rest," he admitted cynically, "but we can discuss that point later, Bancroft. There is still much work to be done. Ring up Dr. Frank Merrivale and see if he has returned from Reading. If so, tell him I should like to see him with the least delay. Afterwards take a walk round the Hall and hunt up those other three Merrivales. I refer to Cecil and the two half-brothers. I wonder what that trio can tell us? If they have retired for the night, they must dress and come downstairs again. Bring them to this room and await my return. Meanwhile, Moreton and I will chat with the servants!"

Anxious to be doing something, Bancroft went off to carry out instructions. Moreton also jumped to his feet ready for action. He was still dazed with the tension of it all. His brain was in a whirl of tumult, a riot of conflicting thoughts with nothing clear or coherent. This drama deepened every second.

"Yes, I want a few words with the servants," Serge repeated, as they passed through the hall. "Experience has taught me, Moreton, that servants are hyper-sensitive individuals, particularly where crime is concerned. There is no good lining them all up regimental fashion and firing questions. Procedure of that kind knocks them over like ninepins. It makes them contradict each other every five seconds, and you can't blame them. I find a casual chat much better, and the more unconventional the more they are pleased!"

As they expected, they found that few domestics had retired for the evening. They showed no sign

of doing so either, for they discussed the latest tragedy in whispering groups, and it was plain little sleep would be obtained that night. Entering one of the larger kitchens, Serge approached a group and commenced to chat. That group comprised the housekeeper, two maids, and a dignified butler, but they recognised Serge at once. They knew he was the leading detective in England, they understood what his presence at the Hall meant, and they prepared to give him the most respectful attention.

"Where do all you people sleep?" Serge asked carelessly, after a friendly bow to the housekeeper.

That individual explained the sleeping arrangements in a few sentences, describing the various rooms allotted to the servants.

"And the small apartment next to the invalid?" Serge inquired in the same casual fashion. "Who occupies that, please?"

"It was specially arranged for Proust some years ago," the housekeeper answered. "Mr. George has uneasy nights, sir—he is often disturbed during the small hours—and Proust must be in attendance!"

"You speak English well!" Serge commented. "Where did you pick it up, Mrs. Maxwell?" He realised that she was a Dane, but he also saw she was a superior type of domestic, buxom, capable, efficient.

"I married an Englishman," she explained, "and I have known your language since childhood, sir!"

"Are you treated decently by the Merrivales?"

The housekeeper selected her words carefully.

"We are treated generously in the matter of money," she replied, "but that is not everything!"

"We don't like the atmosphere of this Hall!" the butler explained confidentially. "Between ourselves, sir, we are getting fed up with the Merrivale family. They are more mysterious than ever, and we have never been able to fathom them. They seem to hate each other like nothing on earth, and there is nothing but constant rows and bickerings. We are asked to perform the most humiliating tasks, to do things that will give them an opportunity of petty revenge, and we are even asked to spy on their movements in turn. That sort of thing does not make life pleasant at the Hall, sir!"

"So you are not surprised at what has happened?" Serge replied.

They shook their heads impressively.

"Not in the least," answered the housekeeper. "We have been expecting something like this for a long time, Mr. Serge!"

"You heard the quarrel that Mr. Stephen had with Lady Merrivale?"

"Yes, but that was nothing out of the ordinary. Those two have quarrelled for years. They never got on well together!"

"You heard their voices raised in anger?"

"Often, sir, and we always thought it would come to blows!"

"You heard the big quarrel to-night?"

"Every word of it, sir," affirmed the butler. "I was near the telephone-box in the Hall, and every word reached me over the stairs. I realised that Mr. Stephen went to Lady Merrivale's room for some purpose—to find a revolver or something—and he

kept on accusing her of shooting the baronet, sir. Lady Merrivale as bitterly denied it, and they called each other terrible names!"

"They continued the same quarrel in the library?"

"Yes, when they came downstairs later, sir. Then there was a long silence, and I thought the library was empty, but soon after that the shot rang out and Mr. Stephen was killed. The shock was awful. I had come along to the servants' quarters for a bit of supper, and was just talking here to Mrs. Maxwell——!"

Serge expressed his thanks and left them. He had obtained the information he wanted.

"Let us return to the smoke-room, Moreton," he said tactfully. "I thought it better to have that interview with the servants personally, for Bancroft has an aggressive manner that is not desirable. Servants object to bullying tactics, and they never disclose all that is in their mind. A confidential talk is more helpful!"

When they returned to the smoke-room, Bancroft awaited their arrival impatiently. It was apparent he had some important news to communicate.

"No good speaking to those other three Merrivales to-night," he announced in a tone of disgust. "They are insensible with drink, Serge, and had to be helped to bed by their valets. That is the usual procedure for this group, for they all drink like fish, and Cecil is the most degenerate! He got hopelessly drunk at dinner, and it is doubtful if he knows what has happened to Stephen. The half-brothers played billiards a long time, then sent for more drinks and have

been imbibing ever since. Philip's death has got on their nerves a bit!"

Serge pondered these details thoughtfully.

"Very well," he said decisively, "I shall postpone their interviews till later. You are certain Cecil wasn't fooling you, Bancroft?"

"Certain," Bancroft answered determinedly. "I am not gulled so easily, Serge, and the servants confirm it into the bargain. I walked into their bedrooms and made sure they were insensible. They are snoring like Trojans, and I doubt if a bomb would disturb them. I have another piece of news for you. Dr. Frank Merrivale has arrived. He has just come back from Reading, and Henry met him when he came in. Both are in the library. The doctor is examining the latest victim!"

Serge stood perfectly still.

Watching him closely, Moreton observed the change on his features. The dark eyes glowed. The inscrutable face became suddenly animated.

"So Dr. Frank has returned from Reading!" he exclaimed in delight. "Good, we shall wait a few moments until the examination is finished, Bancroft. Besides, it is a family matter, and they must have sentiment of some kind. It is better not to disturb communion with the dead——!"

"You will see the doctor afterwards?"

"Immediately, and you can send Henry to bed. We have finished with that individual for the present."

"Glean anything from the servants?" Bancroft queried, lighting a cigar.

"Nothing of importance, but they stress the hate element. This dirge of hate is sung all over the building, and even the servants have mastered the hate complex. They seem disgruntled with the mystery business, but they don't complain about their food or remuneration, so there is no danger of them committing *hara-kiri en masse!*"

"Have you formed any new theory, Serge?" Moreton interjected.

Serge seemed lost in thought. But he stirred himself at last, opened the door stealthily, and closed it again.

"I will postpone discussion of the problem," he said quietly, "but you can take it for granted, Moreton, that I am piecing all the intricate ends together, and it forms a most delightful puzzle. The jungle calls for patience, and those who hunt in the jungle must have wisdom and infinite thought. A false move would spoil everything!"

Bancroft was impressed with Serge's earnestness. Yet at that moment he preferred his own judgment.

"I won't depart from my original theory," he observed, "that Lady Merrivale is the principal actress in this crime mystery, and when we find that particular revolver, Serge—the weapon from which those bullets were fired—that girl will not escape the net I have ready for her."

"I shall also be glad to have a look at that revolver," Serge affirmed, "but we may have to make a thorough search for it, Bancroft, and I have come to the conclusion that it must be unexpected. We are being watched—more carefully than you think, perhaps—and it is better to avoid a full discussion at Merrivale

Hall. You want a good sleep, Bancroft, and after our talk with the doctor we will jump in the Daimler and get back to the hotel!"

There was a movement in the Hall, followed by a slight knock at the door, and a young man entered about forty years of age.

"I am Dr. Frank Merrivale," he announced. "Think you want to see me, Serge." He ignored the others and came right forward to the criminologist.

"Yes, take that seat," Serge said in his most charming manner. "Delighted to meet you, doctor. Indeed I have been trying to get in touch with you for some time. I called at your house earlier in the evening, but found you had not returned from Reading. I was anxious to get your opinion about the baronet's death. Since then, as you know, another terrible tragedy has happened. What do you think of the whole business?"

Dr. Frank Merrivale threw himself wearily in the nearest chair. He gave Serge a straight, penetrating glance. He was a broad-shouldered, athletic-looking type, and gave one the impression he was an efficient medico. His hair was a mass of fair, light curls, his grey eyes unmistakably shrewd and vigilant. Nothing escaped them. His dress was a blue tweed that hung carelessly on his angular body, and his white tie was most conspicuous. Why, Moreton speculated, did he wear a white tie with a lounge suit. All these Merrivales seemed to have a kink about them!

"Yes," he answered gravely, "I rushed from Reading when I got the phone message about Stephen, and caught the next train to Dunseaton. I agree

with you, Serge, that both tragedies are lamentable. They are also highly mysterious, and I am afraid I can help you little!" There was not the slightest emotion in his voice.

Serge introduced his friends, then continued.

"You agree," he asked, "that both your relatives were shot through the brain and death was instantaneous? In other words, each bullet drilled a clean hole through the skull, which suggests they were shot at close range!"

"Unquestionably!"

"Those shots were not fired from the doorway!"

There was an uneasy silence. Moreton drew a deep breath. Serge was always flinging the sensational query, and even Bancroft was astounded.

"You suggest that the shots were fired through the window?"

"I suggest nothing," Serge said with a curious smile. He was speaking now in his best non-committal fashion. "But having regard to the position of the bodies when they fell, death seemingly did not come from the direction of the door!"

"That did not occur to me," Dr. Frank Merrivale drawled. "Come to think of it, Serge, there is a distinct possibility you are right. Those two men died in a matter of seconds. They fell where they stood——!"

"Yes, death came suddenly," Serge assented "but what is your impression with regard to the features? Stephen's eyes are only half-closed, and the same thing is discernible in the baronet's case. What does that suggest to you as a medical man?"

The doctor moved uneasily in his chair, and stared at Serge with a new interest. He had read often about the exploits of this famous detective, and knew he was dealing with a crime expert of no mean order.

"That is just the rummy part," he said jerkily. "What does it suggest?"

"It indicates that death was unexpected," Serge answered. "We can read consternation in the glazed eyes, a look of vast surprise and complete unpreparedness. Nothing was further than death to each victim's mind!"

"That's just what's worrying me," affirmed the doctor. "I have been disturbed by that since my examination of the bodies, Serge. The end came with a stupendous surprise."

"So you rule out the suicide theory in each case?"

"Quite. Any such idea is absurd. Those two men were murdered."

"Then what is your honest opinion, doctor? You can speak freely before these colleagues of mine!"

The doctor seemed to hesitate. He leaned forward a little in his chair.

"I understand Henry has told you my suspicions," he announced. "I have been doing my best to verify them, but they lead nowhere. My inquiries have been fruitless!"

"You ascertained that Lady Merrivale lived a normal existence when she toured with that theatrical company?"

"Quite. I interviewed them all in turn, which meant waiting to-night until the end of the third act, and

they all acknowledged that Sybil was exemplary in her conduct. She made no disreputable acquaintance of any kind, and there is not the remotest rumour that she went through a form of marriage with any actor."

"I am glad to hear that," Serge announced with deep earnestness. "But you have still your suspicions, doctor?"

"Yes, I am afraid Sybil is mixed up in the business," was the slow answer. "You see, Serge, she and Stephen were always at loggerheads since she came to the Hall, and she was forced into that marriage with Philip. Apparently Stephen had definite proof about the baronet's death, and he wanted to get Sybil in his power. One can anticipate the climax!"

"How long have you been attending Mr. George Merrivale?"

"Ten years."

"His spinal trouble originated at that date?"

"Before then, but that was the beginning of the outbreak in advanced form!"

"He was examined by specialists?"

"Yes, from Harley Street, and they pronounced his disease incurable."

"What is his exact ailment?"

"George suffers from a diseased spine," was the answer. "There is a recondite medical term for it, but that is beside the point. Suffice to state, the ailment has steadily developed, and lately he has been confined to his room!"

"You have never known him leave that room?"

"Not to my knowledge!" The query was a disturbing one, and the doctor glanced at Serge keenly.

"There is no possibility that George will walk again?"

"Not the least!"

"Have you ever known a case of recovery?"

"One case, and that was practically a miracle." Dr. Frank Merrivale answered slowly. "It was a very singular case of spinal reaction and, although the patient walked fifty yards one evening, he died from heart exhaustion ten minutes later!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE THIRD CRIME

SERGE and his friends, three evenings later, sat discussing the whole problem in their reserved room at the Talbot Hotel, Dunseaton. There had been few developments in the interim, save the inquest and funeral, and little had been gleaned at the inquest.

The Coroner pronounced the usual verdict, but it had no effect on Serge, for he realised that matters were proceeding to a climax. Although he had made no move of a sensational or dramatic kind, there was something definite formulating in his mind. He began for the first time to see a path through the jungle, and he was careful to keep his thoughts to himself.

The whole nation was roused by the Merrivale crimes, and every newspaper was commenting upon the mystery. No more exciting crime story had occurred for months, and, even at Scotland Yard headquarters, there was a widespread feeling that sensational developments were at hand. But the Chief had implicit trust in Serge, just as he had faith in Bancroft, and he was content to read the daily reports, and to know that everything possible was being done.

The Merrivale victims were buried the day after the inquest in an exclusive corner of the Dunseaton cemetery. The funeral arrangements were carried out with simplicity, and the ceremony was strictly private. All the male relatives attended, with the exception of George Merrivale, and he sent Proust as his representative. To the vast surprise of everyone, Lady Merrivale put in an appearance at the funeral, and, clad in the deepest mourning, she looked stately and beautiful as ever. Serge caught her glance from a distance, and that curious magnetic message flashed between them, a message of complete understanding and trust—occult, indefinable, thrilling. Serge was galvanised by it, and the memory of it sent the blood dancing through his veins. He realised now that this girl meant more to him than life itself, more than fame, fortune, or the wildest success at his profession. He knew then that he was enchained to the greatest passion of his existence, an overmastering love for this pathetic figure, this girl who still remained under that terrible cloud of suspicion and hate!

After dinner in the Talbot Hotel, the three friends

had adjourned to their private room upstairs. A large fire sent its cheerful radiance through the apartment, infusing even Moreton with a sense of optimism. He smoked his cigarette with a feeling of elation, for it was something to be the confidant of a man like Serge. Bancroft was also delighted to have his portrait in the leading papers, and pleased to know the Chief retained faith in him. After all, the Merrivale problem presented all the facets of a diamond, but all the stones had the same brilliance, and no point stood out with distinct force.

"You have not disclosed one fact," Bancroft said with quiet deliberation. "You never told us where you found that .449 bullet, Serge, but I presume you have a definite reason for secrecy?"

Serge puffed at his briar pipe.

"I prefer silence up to a point," he admitted, "but frankly the pieces are in a jumble, and the centre link is still missing. I have not fitted all the pieces together, but when the whole pattern is complete, I will take you into my confidence. I should like your views, however!"

Moreton crossed his legs.

"I am inclined to agree with Bancroft," he said firmly. "I still adhere to a suspicion, Serge, that Lady Merrivale has played a sinister hand in this business. I confess my outlook has been considerably enlarged, but that impression remains. Tabitha's story makes one think, because there is a chance she was speaking the truth. Her words, for one moment, opened up a whole vista of possibilities, and her statement proved a disturbing piece of

intelligence. I have tried to eliminate Lady Merrivale from the picture, but she keeps recurring with occult persistency—which means she has proved too clever for us!”

Serge sat as if carved in stone.

“I admit Tabitha staggered me also!” Bancroft added. “But did you notice the wild look in her eyes, Serge? I concede she is a neurotic, and, no doubt, mentally afflicted as well. As regards Lady Merrivale, I can lay her by the heels soon. I have men shadowing her from morn till night, and she will betray herself one of these days. I have even the post office letters censored. Nothing is being left to chance!”

Serge turned a friendly glance at the speaker.

“Bancroft,” he said slowly, “you proceed along logical lines, but I must warn you to be exceedingly careful. No point can be gained by revealing the knowledge in my possession, but if the thesis I have formed is correct—and I believe it is correct—then Lady Merrivale is quite innocent. If my line of reasoning has failed, then that girl will have to be complimented on her amazing strategy and cunning. I doubt very much, however, if any girl could stage-manage an affair of this kind so elaborately. It is too hopelessly involved—and inhuman!”

“I want to ask a direct question,” Moreton ventured. “Are you bluffing us about Tabitha, Serge, or do you think that girl spoke the truth?”

“That question is difficult to answer,” Serge replied guardedly. “I have indicated to you that this is a complex affair, Moreton, that the pattern of evil

is deeply interwoven, and that I am still searching for the vital thread. I can say no more than that. A possibility exists that Tabitha may not be such a dreamer, because I have known a miracle to happen. Like Bancroft, however, I am a realist in many respects, and I seldom discard fact for phantasy. It so happens that I am inclined to discount what Tabitha has told us, but there is a definite realm of conjecture where such a hazard would prove correct. Until I have explored that zone, until I have traversed that field with infinite patience, I cannot make a definite statement about George Merrivale."

Bancroft was relieved to hear Serge talk in this fashion, because a metaphysical flight always made him throw up his hands in despair.

"You see, Moreton," Bancroft observed, "we have got to determine the question of motive, and if you were engaged in our profession you would understand that motive is the dominant point concerned, and it generally provides a clue. So far as the invalid is concerned, one fails to see any motive behind Tabitha's wild statement. Why should George Merrivale play the part of a spine-stricken invalid against his will? His brain is too active for that. He could make his mark in the world of industry and commerce, or he might prefer travel or activity of some kind, but no sane individual would deliberately select his present mode of existence. It is hardly logical to imagine a confederate in Dr. Frank Merrivale, is it?"

"If we knew the conditions imposed by the Merrivale allowance scheme," Moreton ventured, "the chances

are we might determine if Tabitha was right. Supposing it was not an illusion, Bancroft, there may be a definite reason for the invalid leading this double life. But I admit that the doctor would take some squaring. His connivance at such a thing makes Tabitha's theory decidedly improbable!"

"I am still hunting for that revolver," Bancroft said grimly. "When I get the weapon that fired those shots, Moreton, when I link up the final clue in this case, Lady Merrivale will be forced to confess the whole plot. She will do everything to save her own neck at that moment, but it will be useless. She will go to the scaffold, as sure as Fate!"

Serge ignored Bancroft completely.

"There is another point, Moreton," he said slowly. "For the purpose of revelling in ease and luxury, or with the object of remaining at the Hall, the invalid might have a plausible excuse for carrying on a double existence. But what about Lady Merrivale? Do you suppose for one moment that George, loving this girl as earnestly as he does, would carry on the deception of a spineless invalid?"

"But that may be his special plan of winning sympathy?" Moreton hazarded. "You see, friend, women are a curious genre. They represent an eternal enigma, a never-ending mystery, and for all we know, Lady Merrivale may be in league with the invalid! There seems a definite understanding between them!"

"You may be right, but I doubt it," Serge replied. "Your theory is excellent in one sense, but the dominant rôle of a male is possession, and I do not think George Merrivale has inflicted on himself a

self-imposed martyrdom. More likely he curses and bemoans his fate at every interval, blaspheming the disease that destined him to that room. On the other hand, I am not going to discard Tabitha's statement. You will be surprised to hear that it fits in with the pattern in my mind, the intricate pattern I am trying to weave!"

All this was getting beyond Bancroft.

"For heaven's sake, let us get back to reality," he pleaded. "What about Cecil and the two half-brothers? What do you make of them? They spend their time at drink, billiards, and gambling. You said little, Serge, when I interviewed those men yesterday!"

Serge smiled.

"There was no point in saying much!" he explained affably. "Those three men are degenerates, Bancroft, and we are dealing with a master-mind. One expects the degenerate element in an environment of this kind, where selfishness is fed by wealth and luxury, where every human desire is satisfied. But those three hate each other cordially, and there is little to choose between them. They have deserted City lives for the flesh-pots of Merrivale Hall, so there is no reason to ask why they have not married, or why they are infatuated with the worship of Bacchus; and so long as the wine-cellars of the Hall overflow, they will go on drinking, gambling, and playing billiards. In their estimation it is a glorious life!"

"Cecil certainly struck me as a hog," Moreton said cynically. "He's a beast of a fellow, Serge, a big, good-for-nothing lout, and as lazy as you make

them. I have seldom seen a more besotted face, and I am told he drinks from morn till night. When you were in the library examining those books, I had a long chat with the Swedish butler. It seems that Cecil is killing himself with the accursed stuff, and the other two half-brothers are developing into congenital idiots. Didn't they strike you as half-witted?"

"I am having them carefully watched," Bancroft observed. "When they get tired of playing billiards, they change back to cards, and the whisky bottle is always present. They are walking paragons of vice, Moreton!"

"They are simply the Merrivale degenerates," Serge summarised. "I have already cancelled them from my mental note-book. They are eliminated from the mystery zone. I admit that Cecil has possibilities, but he has ruined himself with drink. Still, we have not fully penetrated the jungle, and the next step will be important!"

They stared at him aghast, hardly believing their ears.

"You anticipate another crime!" Bancroft gasped. "You don't mean that, Serge?"

Serge nodded with dramatic gravity.

"Stephen's death brings us to the outer trees of the jungle," he said slowly, "but there is still the vast undergrowth, the horrible forest of evil—and it has yet to be traversed."

"But if you know as much," Moreton remonstrated, "why can't you do something to prevent it happening? Surely you can issue a warning of some kind?"

"That is impossible," Serge said quietly. "I do not know the name of the next victim, Moreton. I wish I did, for I could act at once, and perhaps it would give me the missing part of my pattern."

Bancroft looked musingly at the speaker.

"Look here, friend," he said impatiently, "I wish you would take us into confidence. I never knew you to predict anything that did not happen, and now you seem to have tumbled on something big. Don't you think, Serge, it is time an arrest was made? The Chief is not at all complimentary of late, although he is trying to be as courteous as possible, but the papers are inquiring what Scotland Yard is doing? We must act, Serge. If Lady Merrivale is the outstanding factor in this case, why should I not make an arrest at once? I fancy she could supply the missing link in your chain of evidence!"

"It is reasonable to suppose," Serge admitted cautiously, "that Lady Merrivale may be playing a deeper game than we think, but for a definite reason, Bancroft, I cannot bring myself to suspect her. Neither can I take you into confidence. My thesis is so improbable and utterly remote from logic that I dare not present it. I am still in a maze of doubt and uncertainty, but the next move will bring matters to a climax!"

"Why the animus of hatred against one person?" Moreton demanded. "Everyone at the Hall, with the exception of Proust and the invalid, seems to suspect the baronet's wife. That is unsettling, isn't it?"

"Why should Proust think differently?" Serge queried. "That is also a curious feature, Moreton.

I cannot see why Proust should want the solicitor arrested!"

"Why worry over Proust!" Bancroft exclaimed impatiently. "I am astounded at you being concerned over him, Serge. That brainless French rascal has nothing but ears, and they are at the service of George Merrivale. Doubtless, if you want analogy, he is more like a creature of the jungle, for he walks on his toes like a panther and moves like a shadow. He intends to keep in the invalid's good books, and that is why he throws us off the scent about Lady Merrivale. He wants to be original, and to make certain that his services are retained at Merrivale Hall!"

Serge repressed a smile.

"Occasionally you speak with wonderful divination," he said cynically, "but if you watched Proust as carefully as I do, you would see he hates Lady Merrivale as much as the rest of them. Now for what reason does he drag in the solicitor?"

"I hardly imagine you are beaten!" Bancroft replied with ungrudging admiration. "You have formed a definite idea about Proust, Serge, but you do not care to trust us. You are afraid of another blunder. I suggest, however, that you let me be the silly ass and arrest Lady Merrivale. That will show the Chief at least we are doing something, and if I am wrong I can procure her immediate release!"

"You forget the question of motive," Serge reminded him. "Even supposing you found that tell-tale revolver, Bancroft—the weapon into which the .449 bullet fitted—what motive exists for Lady Merrivale committing those crimes?"

"We have gone into all that," Bancroft protested. "Lady Merrivale was forced into an obnoxious marriage, and took the first opportunity of breaking her fetters. It was necessary to put Stephen underground because he suspected her, because he knew more about the baronet's death than he told us. The motive is painfully apparent."

"Then I must consult a brain specialist!" Serge responded, "for I completely fail to see a motive, Bancroft. Lady Merrivale is as human and luxury-loving as the rest of them, but would she endanger her existence in this manner, or disturb the serenity of her life at Merrivale Hall? Don't you understand that those people value personal comfort above everything? Possibly you think she appointed a deputy?"

"Approved by the invalid!" Moreton prompted.

"Too fantastical!" Serge rejoined. "Lady Merrivale is far too ultra-sensitive to consent to a task of this magnitude. I have studied her closely, and am convinced she is innocent!"

"You have championed her from the first," Moreton pondered, "but perhaps you are doing so against your better judgment? Do not forget our conversation in your London flat. A girl of this type, although beautiful, may be extremely subtle and without conscience. For all we know, she may be a creature without emotion, soul, or heart, and, if so, she may have planned the perfect crime with a vengeance! I am beginning to think that is what has happened, and you are deliberately shielding her!"

Serge remained impenetrable.

"My argument is an impersonal one," he said slowly. "Yet I think you will find, Moreton, that Lady Merrivale is of a different category altogether!"

"I am inclined to agree with Moreton," Bancroft persisted stubbornly. "I never trust a woman, Serge, particularly the vampire, Venus-sort like Lady Merrivale. She is the soft clinging type who bamboozle men in the finish. For all we know she may have bigamously married the baronet and her first husband may be her accomplice at this moment, stage-managing the whole thing from start to finish. I suggest we place her under immediate arrest, browbeat her in the American fashion with circumstantial evidence, and force a deliberate confession out of her!"

"Such a plan would be lamentably crude and foolish," Serge sighed. "There is nothing artistic in it, Bancroft, and to a man of your intelligent conception of things, I am vastly surprised!" The sarcasm in the voice was terrible.

"Let us get back to your prediction theory," Moreton broke in. "That is pretty awful when you reflect upon it. Serge, do you honestly anticipate another cold-blooded murder at Merrivale Hall?"

"It may not go as far as murder," Serge said slowly, "but everything points to a further crisis. True, it may only be a wild conjecture on my part—and I hope to Heaven it is—but there is still that big element of hate, a vast undergrowth of suspicion and evil plotting, a lava of jealousy and smouldering passion—and when the next eruption comes, Moreton, there may be a vast clearing of the debris!"

"Allow me to repeat," Bancroft said obstinately,

"that our only plan is to arrest Lady Merrivale at once. We can get a confession out of her at any rate, stifle the Press comment about our inactivity, and pacify the Chief for twenty-four hours. If I am wrong, I can climb down and apologise all round!"

"Such precipitation would expose the mine I am laying," Serge said significantly. "I prefer patience, Bancroft—infinite patience and tact—for we must be prepared to act swiftly at the right moment. That is the definite plan of the jungle!"

"Serge is right," Moreton declared with profound conviction. "After all, Bancroft, I see no necessity for Lady Merrivale's immediate arrest, and remember that the doctor could find nothing derogatory against her. Much as she is disliked by the Merrivale household, we can bring no definite charge against her!"

"I never trust women!" Bancroft echoed coldly.

"What about the servants?" Moreton questioned. "Any possibility of one of the foreigners doing this thing?"

"You mean Proust?"

Moreton was staggered by the name, by the penetrative analysis of Serge's brain.

"Yes, it might be Proust!" he said slowly.

"Or the buxom housekeeper, or the dignified Swedish butler," Serge mocked. "Come back to the question of motive, Moreton. That will hit you in the eye every time!"

Suddenly he held up a warning finger. His quick ear detected the sound of running steps up the hotel stairs. The next second the door was knocked with

tremendous excitement, and Dawson burst breathlessly into the room.

"Couldn't trust the Hall telephone, sir!" he exclaimed, "so came myself on the doctor's motor-bike! There has been another murder, Mr. Serge—another ghastly crime. This time it is Mr. Cecil Merrivale!"

CHAPTER XIV

WHO SHOT CECIL MERRIVALE?

AS the Daimler dashed back to the Hall at express speed, almost leaping from the road at certain points, Moreton sat back in his seat with indrawn breath. He knew the reporters would have the news at once. The terrible message would be flashing at that second to the London papers, and to-morrow all England would be dazed by this third tragedy. Scotland Yard would be criticised from every angle, and hard, bitter things would be said about Serge and Bancroft. That is the penalty of being a world-famous criminologist. The public expect every murder solved with comparative ease!

Dumbfounded by what had occurred at the Hall, Moreton saw no sanity whatever in this third crime. How could Cecil Merrivale, a drunken, degenerate reprobate, be linked up with this baffling chain of mystery? He stole a furtive glance at Serge sitting erect in his grey overcoat, pipe in mouth, inscrutable as ever. Nothing could he read from that pale,

unemotional face, for Serge never betrayed himself. He had trained himself to show neither anger nor irritation, and took every incident in life with the utmost *savoir-faire* and complacence.

Thoroughly startled and unnerved, Bancroft sat in a contemplative silence. He was distinctly uncomfortable, for he knew the Chief would be furious at the inaction, and he felt a fool not to have arrested Lady Merrivale at once.

Dawson sat beside Serge at the wheel. He left his machine at the hotel garage, for Serge wanted to question him about the crime, and there was no time to be lost.

"I am as perplexed as anyone, sir," he explained. "As usual, Anderson and I were patrolling the terrace, and when the shot was fired, I dashed straight into the Hall, giving Anderson the cue to run to the library—for that was the direction of the shot. When I entered the Hall, I was met by Miss Tabitha, who was running about half-demented, shouting to everyone that Cecil had been killed, and, when I rushed into the library, Dr. Frank Merrivale was bending over Mr. Cecil's body—but he was then dead!"

"Where were the others, Dawson?"

"I have no idea, sir. There was a lot of banging of doors and running along corridors, while all the servants seemed in a panic, but I fancy most of the Merrivales were in their rooms. I decided not to trust the telephone, so I borrowed the doctor's machine and headed straight for the hotel. That Hall is getting on my nerves, sir. It is a bag of mystery!"

Bancroft spoke.

"You saw no sign of Lady Merrivale?" he shouted.

"Not the slightest, sir. I asked the Swedish butler about her, but he seemed to have lost his head and could give me no information whatever!"

When they arrived at the Hall, there was an air of tangible excitement. The situation had completely changed. Instead of the former silence, the place was full of voices, and the large sitting-room was packed with Merrivale relatives. They were all there chattering like magpies, discussing the tragedy with loud, angry voices. Serge paused and surveyed them. There was Tabitha, talking with dramatic gestures to her sister, and Lady Merrivale seemed struck dumb with horror and amazement. Serge felt curiously thrilled as he looked at that slim, beautiful figure with its ethereal loveliness, its pathetic wistfulness. Something pulled at his heart as he gazed and, when she lifted her eyes slowly in his direction, he saw the answering light of recognition—and something else. Then he glanced at Lilian and Kate, who were debating everything in animated style, and, in the background, sat the half-brothers talking furiously, jabbering like monkeys!

Serge moved to the library. He was followed closely by Moreton and Bancroft, but he paused at the door, and his eyes travelled up the great staircase. The library door was closed, but the sound of voices came from within, and Serge turned swiftly to Bancroft.

"Have a chat with the relatives," he ordered, "and see if you can get something positive. You, Dawson, link up with Anderson, and have a good

talk with the servants. Make certain that everyone is present at the Hall—particularly the French manservant!”

Both men disappeared to carry out these instructions, and Serge opened the library door. He witnessed a repetition of the previous scene—a dead body lying on the centre of the carpet, the apartment a blaze of electric light, Henry Merrivale and the doctor standing before the fireplace. Both men were infinitely worried!

“A bad business, gentlemen!” Serge said sympathetically as he entered.

“Yes, another dastardly crime, Serge,” Henry said grimly, “and we can’t understand it. Cecil has been drinking himself to death as everyone knows, but surely to heaven there was no need to send the poor fellow to eternity! I begin to think this place is haunted!”

“What do you make of it, Serge?” asked the doctor.

“Cecil was killed like the others!” Frank said gravely. “I have hardly got over the shock, Serge. It’s awful to think there is some fiendish mind behind all this, watching us perhaps at this second, planning our doom or salvation. This thing shakes us up terribly. Do you want us to remain, or would you prefer to make your examination alone!”

“Don’t go for the present,” Serge counselled. “I will certainly put a few questions. That French window, for instance? It was half-open when you entered?”

“Yes, it has not been touched. Nothing has been

touched. Henry came in on my heels, and he will confirm that we have meddled with nothing!"

Serge bent over the body. He examined it carefully. Like Stephen and Philip, Cecil lay inanimate and lifeless, another victim of the terrible mystery. About his face was a vast look of surprise and astonishment. His eyes were half-closed like the others, showing that death had come with fierce swiftness. Fascinated by the tragic scene, Moreton watched the expert move from spot to spot, scrutinising, deliberating, surveying, all with a dispassionate gaze! The inspection took five minutes—five minutes' tense, concentrated thought, then Serge rose to his feet, his face impassive.

"Let me have more details," he said quietly.

"We all had dinner as usual," Dr. Frank explained, "and the girls, as customary, went to their rooms afterwards, whilst Henry and I strolled to the smoke-room. I have no idea where Percy and Reginald went, but suppose they made for the billiard-room as usual. They live in that place. As regards Cecil, he was enigmatic to-day. He never touched liquor for some reason, and seemed remarkably sober. He must have entered the library after that, but no one knows why he came here, and I was the first to reach him after the shot was fired!"

Serge sent a deep, penetrating glance.

"Previously, you were both in the smoke-room?"

"Yes, we had just lit up our cigars, and I was looking for a comfortable chair——"

"Which meant a matter of seconds before you reached the library?"

"Yes, not more than three seconds, because I had a wild idea I might capture the assassin, or see at least who was shooting us down in this fashion. But the room was like this when I entered, and I was beaten completely—I met no one in the Hall; I saw no one leave by that window!"

Serge took a powerful torch from his pocket, lit it, climbed through the half-open window and stepped out on the terrace. They saw him move quickly about, that torch searching every inch of the ground, then he returned to the room.

"The body does not smell of drink!" he observed curiously. "You are certain that Cecil did not make a beast of himself to-day?"

"Yes, he kept remarkably sober," Dr. Frank answered, "that is the strange part of it. As probably you know, Cecil is generally half-seas over at this time, but he hasn't touched a drop since the funeral, so we knew Stephen's death had disturbed him. He seemed very upset over Stephen's murder. He never got on well with Stephen, I admit, but like the rest of us, much as we hate each other we draw the line at crime!"

"You still keep silent in the dining-room?"

"Yes, we are not on friendly terms, and silence is much preferred. It may seem childish and absurd, but there is no sentiment in the dining-room!"

"Can you give me some data about Cecil's movements before dinner?"

Henry moved uneasily. He seemed debating a thorny point of some kind, and apparently he reached a decision.

"I may as well tell you what happened," he said quietly. "Did you notice a writing-room on the other side of the hall? Well, I passed that room and heard voices. They belonged to Cecil and Tabitha, and they were ragging each other furiously. I heard some of the words distinctly, but did not pay much attention, for we are always rowing in the Merrivale family!"

"What was it about this time?"

"Tabitha was angry. She seemed beside herself, and I knew she was prancing up and down the room. She called Cecil a drunken sot and degenerate, and kept shouting she was ashamed of him as her brother. He abused her in the politest terms, and suggested the nearest asylum. We all think Tabitha a mental case, Serge, and this evening she was particularly violent. She got so bad indeed that I was going to interfere, but suddenly Cecil burst into a laugh, so I changed my mind and entered the smoke-room!"

Serge turned to the doctor.

"A few evenings ago," he observed, "when we were discussing those other shots, Dr. Merrivale, we thought a bullet fired from the hall would not be effective. In other words, the individual with the revolver would have to enter this room, or the shots might have been fired through the window. You will admit the same deduction must be made in this case. That is distinctly obvious from the position of the body, and a man with a bullet in his brain does not walk many yards!"

"Are you assuming that the shot came from the window?"

"We have only one pair of footsteps outside," Serge continued, "and they belong to Donaldson, our own Scotland Yard man. He came upon the scene from the terrace, but he made no attempt to enter this room. He kept on guard and held the library under observation. You will admit, therefore, that we are still up against a problem?"

"May I return to Dunseaton?" asked the doctor. "My wife will be terribly anxious when this news leaks out, and I should like to reassure her I am all right. I am feeling distinctly tired to-night!"

"I have finished with both of you gentlemen!" Serge said courteously. "But send Miss Tabitha in to me, please, and reassure her she is not going to be arrested!"

The two men departed with marked signs of relief, but Moreton could glean nothing from their faces. They were glad that no suspicion rested on them, which stressed the selfishness of this Merrivale crowd.

Tabitha entered without signs of grief, but she glanced apprehensively at the body on the floor. It was a glance of aversion and horror, but no one could detect any personal significance in it. She had not been crying, and there was a normal look about her features. Her black dress accentuated her strange pallor, and that scar on the face was still prominent.

"I have nothing to do with this business!" she said petulantly. "Why send for me!"

Serge placed a seat at her disposal, but she ignored it. It was evident she wanted to leave the room as soon as possible.

"I don't wish any misunderstanding!" Serge begged in his cheeriest manner. "I am interviewing certain people over this third crime, Miss Tabitha, and, as you know, it is my business to ask questions. Won't you take this seat, please?"

But Tabitha preferred to stand. Once again her eyes went to the dead body, and it was apparent she was thoroughly frightened. Her self-confidence seemed to desert her. She clutched nervously at the back of a chair, and stood there in a strained attitude.

"You spoke to your brother before dinner?" Serge commenced casually. "Indeed I believe you were the last person talking to him. And you quarrelled over something——?"

Tabitha nodded vigorously.

"I expect Henry told you all about it!" she exclaimed vindictively. "I saw him cross the hall during the row, and thought he was coming in to interfere. Henry has always disliked me, Mr. Serge, and he above everyone thinks I am mentally unbalanced, but I am as sane as any of them!"

"What was your row with Cecil?"

"I discovered him in a sensible mood," Tabitha said bitterly, "and so I took the opportunity of reproaching him for his drunken habits, his evil life and general decadence. I was glad to see him sober at the funeral, but I thought when dinner came to-night he would be making a beast of himself as usual. So I warned him about the terrible mess he was making of his life, and told him we were all being punished for our evil conduct at Merrivale Hall."

"You used no threats of any kind?"

"No, not in the least. I was just angry!"

"And what reply did he make?"

"He was annoyed with me for interfering, and reminded me I should be in a home for incurables!"

"He did not associate your name with the other two crimes?"

"No, of course not!"

Serge continued his cross-examination, then Bancroft entered with an apology. "I can get no sense out of that crowd!" he said impatiently. "They all plead the most sublime innocence, Serge, and Lady Merrivale looks as if she had just descended from heaven. Who is this? Ah, Tabitha! And what has she got to say about the business!"

"You may question her if you like!" Serge suggested.

Bancroft regarded the girl with sudden suspicion. He was in one of his truculent, angry moods, and wanted to reveal his authority in some manner.

"Well, young lady," he exclaimed, "you don't seem upset over this affair. Are you flesh and blood, or just stone like the rest of them? I suppose you are as selfish and callous as the others, thinking of your own skin and your own precious existence!"

Tabitha looked at him dazedly.

"The shock of Cecil's death has been terrible!" she said with a white face. "I cannot realise it yet. He does not seem dead. But it is true. My God, yes, it is true. Cecil is really dead!" Suddenly, without warning, she ran and flung herself over the dead body, covering the face with passionate kisses, fondling

his hands, face, and hair, clinging to him as if her heart would break. "Oh, my poor Cecil!" she wailed, the tears streaming down her face. "You always were a fool—and we quarrelled so often—but it was not your fault! You were just a fool, and the drink was too great a temptation for you!"

Bancroft and Moreton were staggered by this outburst. They did not think it possible for a Merrivale to show emotion, or betray feeling of any kind. When the wild sobbing finished, Bancroft assisted the girl to her feet.

"Who has done this thing?" he asked in kindly fashion. "Who do you think has done it? You must suspect someone!" He regretted the brutality of his demeanour. He saw Tabitha was not play-acting, that she was distraught and unnerved by what had happened.

Serge watched the scene with his unchanging countenance. Yet his eyes shone brilliantly, and his lips tightened in a sterner resolve.

"I cannot tell you!" she faltered. "If I knew the answer to that question, Mr. Bancroft, I would never have kept silent. Cecil is my brother—my own brother—and no matter how much we quarrelled in life, his death must be avenged!"

"Do you still bolt your door at night?" Serge asked casually. "You have not been troubled with any more illusions, Miss Tabitha?"

She glanced at him doubtfully, wondering how much of her thoughts she could reveal.

"I still lock my door," she answered, "but I have not slept since. I have not closed my eyes since

George Merrivale passed along that corridor. If I was deceived that night, then I certainly am mad, Mr. Serge!"

It was a courageous thing to say, and the expert appreciated it.

"Very well," he said gently, "return to the others, please, and ask Lady Merrivale to step here a moment!"

Tabitha left with slow, faltering steps, and one long glance at that motionless form. She seemed on the verge of a complete breakdown, and Moreton confessed he had not seen a more tragic figure in his life.

Lady Merrivale entered quietly, taking one swift glance at the occupants. When Serge met her gaze she flushed involuntarily, for at that second he seemed to read her soul. The other men bowed with excessive politeness, and Serge placed a chair. She seated herself with languid grace, the lovely face carved as it were in marble. She avoided glancing towards the dead body, and outwardly her demeanour revealed no emotion of any kind. Her eyes remained on Serge, and Moreton wondered again what secret message flashed between the pair? Why was the famous expert allowing himself to be duped by this girl? Was he doing his best to defend her at all costs? Was this really the perpetrator of the ghastly crimes? But how could that be possible? How could any girl be guilty of such fiendish cruelty?

"Sorry to trouble you again," Serge commenced gravely, "but I shan't detain you more than a few seconds, Lady Merrivale. We are now faced with another distressing tragedy, a crime that must come

home to you with personal significance, because this man is your own brother! Your sister Tabitha mentioned some quarrel—some disagreement that took place between her and Cecil before dinner. Do you know anything about that altercation?"

"Yes, Tabitha said something about it," Lady Merrivale answered, "but she only referred slightly to the incident. A quarrel is nothing unusual in Merrivale Hall, Mr. Serge, and the servants will confirm that if you ask them. Stephen and I were always quarrelling, and frankly I had real contempt for Cecil!" The brown eyes strayed towards that motionless form, and their owner shuddered instinctively and clutched at the table for support. Serge noted that shrinking, and fathomed it correctly.

"You spoke to Cecil to-day?"

"Yes, a few words this afternoon. Like Tabitha, I was much surprised to find him in a sober mood, and I hoped he was going to continue in that rational state. He replied I was the last to lecture him on morals, but of course he has always misunderstood the rôle I have played in this house. He never realised why George befriended me!"

"He said something that offended you?"

"Yes, he repeated the accusation Stephen made, and said he would find the missing revolver before the end of the week!"

"You went straight to your room after dinner?"

The dark eyes gazed straight into brown, and Moreton saw the earnestness of that glance. It seemed a mute appeal for a confession of some kind, an appeal to be honest and truthful!

"Yes, I am still interested in Tolstoy, Mr. Serge!"

"You did not return to the library?"

"No, I remained in my room!"

A slight knock came to the door, and when Bancroft opened it Proust entered like a cat! Everyone was struck by his feline attitude at that second. What a remarkable creature Proust was! He seemed truly a creature of the jungle!

Bowing humbly to Serge, he gave his message: "Mr. George would like to see you immediately, sir!"

"Tell Mr. George to go to the devil!" Bancroft roared explosively. "We have something else to do beside waste time with an eccentric old bear! Go on, give him that answer, friend—and hop it!"

Serge held out a restraining hand.

"One moment, Proust," he begged. "I may want to ask a question." He turned to Bancroft. "I have finished with Lady Merrivale. Is there any point you wish cleared up?"

Bancroft saw his opportunity.

"Yes," he said swiftly, "there is something I wish to ask. Up to the present, Lady Merrivale, thanks to the interest manifested in you by certain people, we have postponed an official search of your rooms. But we are still hunting for that missing revolver. Have you any objection to a thorough search being made of your apartments?"

"Not in the least, Mr. Bancroft!" The answer came quietly, without resentment of any kind.

"In other words, you have got the rooms nicely tidied, eh? There is no chance of anything important being found at the moment?"

"I object to that remark," Serge said sternly. "You are not justified in making allegations, Bancroft, and I think you should apologise. I tell you what you can do, however." He turned to the girl. "Perhaps it might be advisable, Lady Merrivale, for this search to be carried out at once? It will clear the air so far as Bancroft is concerned. Take Tabitha along with you and see that nothing is disturbed. It is only a formal matter, and we have no desire to inconvenience you in the least!"

She rose to her feet with that inimitable grace, a wonderful tenderness entering the brown eyes. The glance she gave Serge would have dazzled most men and, acting on impulse, he suddenly raised her hand to his lips. It was an old-fashioned act of courtesy, but it had great significance to these two lives! Bancroft and Moreton were dumbfounded. Was it the real thing, they asked, or was Serge merely playing a part?

"It is good to know that someone believes in me!" she said in a low voice that haunted Moreton a week afterwards, a voice thrilling Serge like Eastern music, drugging brain and senses to everything but Romance and Love! . . . Then she passed out like a royal personage, stately, erect, beautiful, with just the faintest nod to Bancroft and Moreton.

Serge turned to Proust with a smile.

"Well, friend," he said, "what is your honest opinion about this third incident? You are concerned about it, of course?"

"All the servants are excited, sir," Proust responded emphatically, "and the housekeeper talks about

giving in her notice. They are getting into a panic, and some may leave before the end of the week. They say that Merrivale Hall is haunted, sir!"

"How is Mr. George Merrivale?"

"Never saw him in a worse state, sir. He has trembled like a leaf ever since the last shot. He has just had a quarrel with Dr. Frank about it!"

"So those two quarrel!" Serge mused. "What a delightful place it is, Proust! But come now, what do you think of the whole business? Surely you have an original idea of some kind, eh? Your brain overflows with new thoughts, Proust!"

But the cynicism was lost on the French manservant. He just stood there like a docile mute, the perfect factotum, the unique servant. His attitude was one of complete servility, without arrogance, and this was not lost on Serge. He was making a profound study of the Frenchman!

"I prefer to say nothing, sir!" he replied doggedly.

"You would hardly say that Henry Merrivale was mixed up in this affair, would you now?"

"I prefer to say nothing, sir!"

"You could hardly say less, Proust. But what were you doing, friend, just before the tragedy?"

"I went down to the library for a book, sir! Mr. George allows me a novel any time I want to read, but before I reached the second landing, I heard the revolver shot and dashed back to my room for dear life!"

CHAPTER XV

LILIAN MAKES A STRANGE AVOWAL

“**W**HEN did you leave your room, Proust?”
“When I heard the commotion downstairs, sir! Someone was screaming at the top of their voice! That was Miss Tabitha. She was shouting that Merrivale Hall was accursed, that Mr. Cecil was killed, that everyone was going to be murdered! After that there was a panic amongst the servants, a lot of banging of doors, and the Merrivales seemed fighting each other. They all got in the sitting-room and a great argument started. So far, they have talked only in pairs, but these crimes have unnerved them, and to-night they discussed the whole problem like a committee. I slipped down, listened to everything said, and reported the whole thing to Mr. George. He is very annoyed they have not consulted him this time, for they generally ask his advice about everything!”

“Poor old chap!” Serge muttered cynically.

Moreton pondered over Proust's statement, and wondered what would Bancroft make of it, but Bancroft had gone to make his official inspection of Lady Merrivale's rooms. It all sounded unreal and fantastical. Perhaps Proust was duping them all with fiendish cunning, and Moreton marvelled at the Frenchman's dexterity with the language. Where had he learned to speak English so fluently? One

could hardly detect his Latin accent. What if he possessed a master-brain, a more subtle mind than even Serge surmised? What if he was hoodwinking them all at this moment?

"I hardly think Mr. George is to be pitied!" he said curiously. "He has everything he wants so far as personal comfort is concerned, and his disability would be less trying if he was not so irritable. But he is terribly impatient, sir. Hark at him ringing that bell!" . . . Yes, loud frantic peals were sounding through the house. The invalid was in a tremendous stew about something!

"Let him ring!" Serge said unpleasantly. "It will confirm that he is still alive, and teach him a lesson into the bargain. Another point, Proust. When I last spoke to your distinguished employer, he mentioned a missing revolver——!"

Proust turned pale, even livid, and much of the self-confidence left him.

"——which he used to keep in his room!" Serge finished. "It appears the revolver has been missing some time, Proust. You are not collecting little destructive articles of that kind, are you? I mean, you never saw the weapon referred to by the invalid?"

Moreton was astonished at the result of that question. Proust turned death-white with terror of some kind. Absolute fear started from his eyes. His whole body trembled as if with the ague. He could hardly speak. Words refused to come from his lips. He stood there petrified, a picture of guilt and despair.

"I am waiting, Proust——!"

"No, Mr. Serge," he said hurriedly with a rush, "I have not seen that revolver for months. That is another mystery I cannot fathom, because I have been searching for it everywhere. But it has disappeared completely!"

"How unfortunate? You did actually handle that weapon, Proust?"

"Only once, sir, when cleaning it for Mr. George. Then I put it back in his trunk. I hate revolvers, Mr. Serge. They put the most evil thoughts in my head!"

"They are dangerous things," Serge admitted philosophically. "Does any other servant attend Mr. George in your absence, Proust?"

"Occasionally, sir. If Mr. George is in a bad temper, as he is at present, and when he keeps on ringing that bell—as he is doing now—some other servant knows I am engaged and goes to him. What a row he is making at present, Mr. Serge! Listen to him!"

"Yes, but let him ring till he bursts a blood-vessel," Serge continued. "Now listen to me, Proust, and don't get flurried. You go frequent errands for Mr. George Merrivale?"

Proust edged imperceptibly away from the dead body. He wanted to get away from that room at all cost. The sweat stood out on his forehead. His legs shook.

"Oh yes, sir!" he answered in agitation. "I often go little journeys. London, Reading, and elsewhere!"

"What kind of journeys, Proust?"

"To buy books, sir. Only that. It's always books—then more books! The journeys to Reading and

London are for the same purpose, the buying of books—strange books I can hardly pronounce. They are not novels, sir. No, they have strange titles that I never understand, but they are all classical volumes of some sort, learned books on medicine, anatomy, the structure of the human body—that kind of thing, sir!”

“Very good, Proust. That will do for the present. Run along and tell your employer I may join him presently, but that I happen to be exceedingly busy at the moment. He will understand what I mean. And as you step through the hall, convey a message to Miss Lilian that I desire her presence!”

Proust, with a brief word of thanks, disappeared like a shadow from the room—a silent exit because his feet made no sound when walking. Moreton wondered how he managed it. Proust had accomplished the trick of walking on air—a very difficult process!

Cigarette between lips, arms akimbo, chin high in the air, Lilian strolled into the library with a fine air of indifference. Her dark evening gown suited her to perfection, and Moreton woke suddenly up to the fact that she was marvellously good-looking. She smiled archly at him as she entered, giving him a saucy look of independence, and marched boldly up to Serge.

“Now what do you want, old bean?” she asked with girlish recklessness. She never glanced at the stricken man on the floor! “Surely you haven’t got the handcuffs dangling for me, eh?”

“I want to speak to you about Miss Tabitha,”

Serge said courteously, waving his hand towards a seat.

"But I have no desire to discuss my relatives," Lilian snapped crossly. At that second the body on the floor caught her gaze, but she only shrugged her shoulders indifferently, and sent a cloud of smoke from her lips. Apparently she was as unconcerned as the rest, and yet Moreton began to wish she was different! Those blue eyes of Lilian Merrivale commenced to play havoc with the young novelist.

"Have you heard the doctor express an opinion that Tabitha was a mental case?"

That query puzzled Lilian. She gave another glance at Moreton, quizzical, appraising, doubtful, then suddenly roused herself.

"Are you insinuating that Tabitha is guilty of these crimes?" she asked with brutal frankness.

"I insinuate nothing!" Serge replied quietly. "Tabitha happens to have all my sympathy, and I am predisposed in her favour more than you imagine. But I am wondering if you are right in what you hinted the other evening!"

"You speak in enigmas, Mr. Serge!"

Serge recited the outline of what Tabitha had confessed to him concerning her midnight visitor. He did so deliberately, and in a few brief words.

"Have you ever suffered from that kind of delusion?" he asked politely.

Watching the scene critically, Moreton was amazed at the effect of the words. To his intense surprise, a low sob suddenly escaped Lilian's throat, a choking gasp that betrayed her tense nervous excitement.

Tossing her cigarette carelessly in the grate, something like terror entered her eyes. All the arrogance slipped away like a cloak, leaving her a trembling young girl who cannot conquer her own nerves.

"Oh, it's horribly true!" she moaned piteously. "I never thought Tabitha saw that—never—never! . . . Believe me, Mr. Serge, this is a madhouse. We are haunted by strange spectres, by ghostly visitants who come at all hours of the night. Yes, I saw the same apparition a week ago, but I never mentioned it to anyone. My room is close to Tabitha's on the second landing, and it was after midnight when it happened. I heard footsteps coming along the corridor. Stealthy steps that made hardly any noise, and they passed outside my door. I was reading at the time, because I seldom fall asleep before two in the morning; my nerves are too bad for that. I therefore know I was in my normal senses, and naturally I wondered who was perambulating the house at that hour! You see, we are always suspecting each other, always plotting and making mischief. So I got up and looked out, and saw the face distinctly, in the darkness. It was George Merrivale, Mr. Serge! Yes, and he was walking as upright as a giant. I nearly swooned at the sight, so I rushed back to bed and covered my head with the clothes!" She shuddered again at the bare recollection.

"Why have you not mentioned this before?" Serge asked sternly.

"I thought they would all call me insane like Tabitha, and of course I had no proof to confirm it. But now that Tabitha saw the same thing, I know

we are each speaking the truth. He passed quickly—ever so quickly—and went upstairs to the next landing.”

“So Tabitha was right, after all?”

“Yes, I had no idea that was what she wanted to tell you,” Lilian exclaimed with great vehemence. “George Merrivale can walk as well as I can. I am positive of it!”

Moreton found it hard to keep in touch with reality at that moment. He felt living in a world of shadows, of strange illusions and grotesque happenings, and the greatest centre of horror seemed the plague-spot of Merrivale Hall! The whole atmosphere exuded a baneful, sinister influence, and even the books on the library shelves seemed uncanny, supernatural, weird! If this thing were true that Lilian had revealed, if George Merrivale was a normal individual instead of a spine-stricken invalid, gifted with superlative brain-power and endowed with vast cunning, then the enigma of Merrivale Hall was fearsome and terrible! Moreton wondered again what Bancroft would have thought at Lilian’s amazing statement.

“I shall give the matter further consideration,” Serge temporised, “but do not mention the incident to anyone else for the present. Your silence on that point is imperative, Miss Lilian?”

“I shall not breathe a word, Mr. Serge!” she promised in a tearful whisper.

“As you say, this Hall is a mischief-making abode, and doubtless someone has been playing a practical joke. That may seem a peculiar statement, but perhaps Proust or one of your relatives has dressed

deliberately for the part—you are all much alike, you know—and may have tried to frighten you from the Hall or something. An impersonation may be feasible. Look, for instance, at the amazing resemblance between Henry and Frank! Those two are identical in appearance almost, except for the distinction in age!”

“I have told you the truth,” Lilian said stubbornly, “and you must believe it. It was George Merrivale who passed my door, and I should recognise him anywhere. I am a Merrivale, and not so easily duped. But I am getting frightened, Mr. Serge—horribly frightened. It may be my turn next!”

Serge looked at her earnestly. He saw she was a helpless, nerve-wrecked girl, and the horror of these crimes had exposed all the weakness of her sex!

“I suggest you and Kate go to London for three months,” he said practically. “Surely there is nothing to prevent you leaving the Hall, Miss Lilian? You must have friends in Town?”

“Kate would never dream of leaving,” Lilian answered, “and I prefer to stay and see this problem solved. If we are to be eliminated, our enemy will follow us to the ends of the earth. You must arrest the murderer, Mr. Serge!”

“If such a thing does not happen within forty-eight hours,” Serge said impressively, “it may be necessary for you all to leave the Hall, Miss Lilian!”

She gasped at the import of his words.

“You do not mean another victim?” she moaned,

glancing desperately at Moreton as if for instinctive support. Moreton sent her an answering message of sympathy.

"That I cannot tell," Serge answered dramatically. "This is a baffling problem, and there are still one or two knotty points to unravel. But I am getting nearer the heart of things, and until I am able to act with unerring judgment, Merrivale Hall must remain a danger zone!"

"I will stick it out, Mr. Serge," Lilian said with affected gaiety. "I have every confidence in you—we all have, as a matter of fact—and we believe you will make an arrest soon!" She moved suddenly to the dead body of her relative, made the sign of the cross reverently, and slipped from the room like a frightened schoolgirl.

Kate entered of her own accord. She seemed to take it for granted she would be interviewed next, and she was right in that assumption. As usual, she looked bloodless, dispirited, without vigour. Indeed her lifelessness was strangely pathetic, accentuating her delicate body and making one suspect she had not long to live. Moreton was forcibly struck by the pallor on her face, and he noted the wan hands that twitched nervously. Kate's next illness might be her last!

She sank into the chair with a gesture of weariness, but smiled at the two men.

"I shall not detain you long," Serge commenced, "but I have an important question to ask, Miss Kate. Have you ever known Mr. George Merrivale to leave his room since he was bed-ridden?"

A flush entered the pale, unhealthy face, and both hands trembled more than ever. Kate was not prepared for that terrible question, but she made a brave effort to answer it.

"It is curious you should say that, Mr. Serge," she answered. "A week ago I had a most rummy experience, and I have never mentioned it to the others. I had an idea after midnight one evening that someone was moving about downstairs, so I rose, slipped on a wrap, and went out on the corridor. I could see no sign of anyone, so I went as far as the staircase and looked over. There was still no sign of anyone, so thinking it all very foolish, I returned to my room. A few seconds later I actually did hear someone coming upstairs, and whoever it was seemed to be climbing the next landing. I rose hurriedly again and went out on the corridor, but could not see in the dark who it was and thought it might be Proust. Something made me follow the figure, but apparently I was not quick enough, for it darted suddenly upstairs at a furious pace, and the next thing I heard was George's door shutting with a bang. So I concluded it was Proust and returned to my room!"

"You were not disturbed by that incident?"

"I came to the conclusion it was Proust. Who else could it have been?"

"Who else indeed?" Serge questioned. "Well, I am glad you did not mention the matter to anyone, and I shall be exceedingly obliged if you keep silent. It is a most important point, and I know you will not disappoint me, Miss Kate!"

"I certainly won't mention it," Kate replied. "If I did, I would only be laughed at for weeks!" She shuddered violently as her glance fell on the dark object on the floor, and tried to overcome her horror at that moment.

"You are distressed by all these crimes?" Serge queried.

"I am much distressed by everything!" she confessed truthfully. "Yet, as regards Cecil, Mr. Serge, I think, after all, it was the best end!"

Moreton started. What curious avowal was coming from this girl? Strange to state, the expression on her face was a little malevolent. Something of the old hate had returned to it.

"You mean——?" Serge encouraged.

"I mean that Cecil was drinking himself to death, and a bullet seems a more satisfactory end. Cecil was heading along the path of degeneracy, and it was inevitable he should fall over the cliffs!"

"I will not discuss that aspect," Serge said a trifle coldly. "Thank you for coming here. I will reflect on your words most carefully!"

Feeling dismissed, Kate rose and passed from the room like a spectre, her features dead-white, her figure thin, angular and gaunt-like. Something like a smile of refined cruelty played about her lips. Moreton gasped at the sight! Could she, by any chance——? He played with the thought whimsically, and then Serge spoke.

"A curious personality!" the expert observed. "What do you make of her, Moreton?"

"I was just wondering if she could handle a revolver

as coolly as she talked," Moreton ruminated. "I should not like to offend that girl. She could slit my throat without a tremor almost!"

Serge made no reply to that. He rose to his feet like a man who has arrived at an important decision.

"Let us have a few words with the invalid!" he suggested. "He may have something important to communicate!"

As they anticipated, Proust was close to the door, but Serge took no notice.

"Hope you heard everything, Proust!" he said good-humouredly. "But run along and tell the invalid we are coming!"

Proust disappeared in a flash. Before ascending the stairs, however, Serge moved aside and glanced into the billiard-room. He withdrew his head and closed the door gently. "As I thought," he muttered, "Percival and Reginald—those delightful half-brothers—are having another strenuous game—and Henry Merrivale is actually marking for them! We are certainly making progress, my friend, but in what direction?" As usual, the words were mystical and profound.

When they arrived at the invalid's room, George was awaiting them with a vast impatience. His hands moved restlessly on the clothes; his whole face seemed distorted with anger and humiliation. With a violent effort he restrained the oath on his lips.

"Well, Serge," he gasped, "I thought you were never coming. I have been ringing that damned bell for ages, but you all seem absolutely deaf, and Proust has been too afraid to come near me. Now, why do

you spend your valuable time with the others? Has it not occurred to you that they are all pulling your leg, hoodwinking you at every turn of the road, leading you along a false scent?"

"What do you think of the latest crime?" Serge inquired sternly.

"I am annoyed, of course," the invalid replied; "but I think it just Nemesis. You see, Cecil was never good to anyone but himself, and being a perfect encumbrance on the earth he has now met with his deserts. Indeed, you will find few Merrivales worth their salt, Serge—with the possible exception of Sybil—and you must not be surprised at what has happened. Stephen was always a bully, wanting the sweets of Merrivale Hall for his own delectation, and Philip was the super-snob who made things unpleasant for everyone. Believe me, Philip was too superior to live, and so he has been eliminated by a kind, discerning Fate. That may seem a cruel thing to say, but the atmosphere of Merrivale Hall is a good deal more pleasant since these people have gone!"

The two men were appalled by the terrible callousness of these words. The invalid had revealed the deepest content of his own selfish mind, and the revelation was revolting!

"You speak from a distorted viewpoint," Serge observed, controlling his disgust. "But don't you think it would be much more helpful if you revealed the expert shot in this building?"

"Your job is to discover that individual," George chuckled. "Frankly, I am amused at the whole

business. If you want my idea of the plot it is this: someone outside has been watching the Merrivales carefully, watching how we live, eat, drink, and disport ourselves, and he or she has become as envious as hell! Sequel: three revolver shots fired through a French window, and a sudden escape in the darkness. Whoever it is, Serge, they are to be complimented on their sagacity, because it is no small thing to outwit a man of your amazing intelligence!" The sarcasm in the voice was palpable.

Serge remained silent. He was subjecting each word to a fierce analysis.

"Where the devil is Bancroft?" queried the invalid suddenly. "I have missed his ugly face for some time!"

"I have allowed him to make a search of Lady Merrivale's rooms," Serge replied. "Miss Tabitha is with her sister, and I daresay they are all having coffee and biscuits in the most amiable fashion!"

"Bancroft will never find that revolver!" George muttered, his mouth twitching curiously, and a sombre glint in his eyes. "Believe me, Serge, the man hasn't got the intelligence of a third-class magpie. In my opinion, he should remain in the library and get eliminated! Serge, I may be wrong, but it seems to me that you are up against the master-mind at last. This is the perfect crime with a vengeance! And how the papers are gloating over your discomfiture! How they will laugh to-morrow at your stupidity, your inaction, your want of vision, and all the rest of it!"

Serge rose to his feet.

"As you are not prepared to help with any practical suggestions, Mr. Merrivale," he said quietly, "I will bid you good night and pleasant dreams!"

The invalid laughed. His mirth shook his whole body, almost sending him into a fit, but he sobered at last and waved his hand in farewell.

"Why not concentrate on Proust!" he suggested. "I saw that miserable French valet of mine finger my revolver very lovingly one day—and I have never set eyes on it since!"

CHAPTER XVI

LADY MERRIVALE DISCOVERS A REAL FRIEND

HALF an hour later Lady Merrivale stood alone on the moonlit terrace. She had not retired to bed because she knew sleep was impossible, so throwing a white wrap round her shoulders she told her maid not to wait up for her and slipped out on the terrace.

It was a glorious night, with the moonbeams sending a wonderful searchlight over the Hall and grounds, and this girl had yielded to the magic of the hour. After all, Lady Merrivale was still a girl, with the warm young blood pulsating through her veins, and she had a definite reason for going on the terrace. The three crimes at the Hall had clouded her brain with sadness, making the atmosphere of the place almost unbearable, and she knew that Bancroft had convinced himself of her guilt. The search in her

rooms had proved fruitless, and the Scotland Yard man had gone away chagrined and annoyed. She knew what his last words meant. She would still remain under that hideous cloak of suspicion, she would still be tracked and shadowed like a criminal. Doubtless, even at that moment, she was being watched by one of Bancroft's spies.

All that unjust suspicion was terrible, and small wonder that this girl could get little peace of mind. Yet, strange to state, she was filled just then with the most unutterable happiness. After all, there was one big compensation in life, for when Love arrived the whole world was changed from gloom to joy, and Love had crept into this girl's heart with a sudden burst of realisation. This explained why the Hall was unbearable at that moment, why she responded to the witchery of the moonbeams, why her soul thirsted for the night air and freedom.

She leaned over the balustrade, weaving her dreams, allowing her mind to reflect on Serge, and to recall the passionate glow in his dark eyes. She was surrounded at the Hall with nothing but suspicion, jealousy, and hate. Bancroft and his satellites were convinced that she was the guilty party of the Merrivale drama, and Serge alone stood out as her champion, as the one individual in the world who believed in her, and that thought compensated for everything else. She felt she could face the scaffold itself if Serge retained his faith in her.

She had seen him go off in the Daimler with the others. The car had departed just a few seconds ago, and as it turned the corner of the drive, she had

felt an irresistible impulse to run after it, to drag Serge out by the arm, to tell him that she guessed the secret of his eyes. But that, of course, would have been madness on her part. She must keep silent until he spoke, until he assured her with his own voice that he believed in her, until he whispered of the love and Romance that had suddenly filled each of their lives!

Tears entered the brown eyes as she stood there, a lovely, alluring figure of ethereal beauty and charm. Hundreds of admirers had fought for her hand, painters had fought with each other for the chance of painting her portrait, and the Society papers had talked for months of her beauty, but Lady Merrivale had kept herself untarnished from the whole of them. Philip she had married because there was no escape, no alternative, no choice in the matter, yet from the moment she had signed the register at the Dunseaton Church she knew the marriage ceremony was the greatest mockery in the world. They had lived as strangers, and, even on the Continent, the honeymoon was nothing but the greatest farce, for Philip and her had occupied separate apartments at each hotel, and not once had the baronet even suggested Love or a pretence of it. No, her union with the baronet was part of the great mystery, and when Philip was shot by the hand of the assassin, she knew that the marriage itself had meant nothing to her, nothing but a ceremony at the Dunseaton Church and a glorious trip to the Continent.

Suddenly something moved under the terrace itself, and she started back in alarm. It was a man's figure,

and he was coming slowly towards her, mounting the terrace steps even at that instant. She held her breath and something cold clutched at her heart, for the approaching figure was no other than Serge, and he never paused until he reached her side.

"I fancied it was you," he said quietly. "Aren't you afraid of catching cold, Lady Merrivale?"

She remained motionless before him, her breast heaving in a strange tumult, her brown eyes averted from his gaze. Her first instinctive feeling was one of happiness and delight, of fierce, passionate joy, then it passed and anger entered the lovely face. When she spoke, he hardly recognised her voice.

"So you have come to spy on me like the others!" she said coldly. "Bancroft has me followed every second of the day. I am shadowed from morn till night, and even my correspondence is opened and censored. It is your turn to spy on me to-night, Mr. Serge? Does that explain your presence here at this hour?"

Serge smiled a little grimly.

"To be perfectly candid," he replied, leaning over the balustrade, "I am disgusted with Bancroft and the whole crowd of them, Lady Merrivale. I have returned here to-night for a definite purpose, but it was certainly not to spy on you or your movements. I have sent Bancroft and Moreton back to the hotel at Dunseaton, but it was necessary for me to return to the Hall!"

"Yet you went away in the car?" she protested. "I saw you distinctly from my bedroom!"

"Yes, I went as far as the lodge gate," he replied good-humouredly, "then I changed my mind and came back. Bancroft and Moreton wanted to return with me, but I made young Moreton take the wheel and drive back to the hotel. I had a definite reason for acting in this mysterious fashion."

The anger departed suddenly from the lovely features, and when Serge glanced at her again he saw she was actually smiling. He moved a step nearer to her, and the magic of her presence thrilled through him like new wine. He saw the tears in the brown eyes, the tragedy in the lovely face, and in that second he guessed everything—the misery of this girl's life at Merrivale Hall, what she was suffering under this hideous cloud of suspicion and intrigue!

"You are going to keep watch all night with one of Bancroft's men?" she questioned. "It is your turn to guard the precincts of the Hall, to spy on some of the inmates, to keep watch until dawn?"

He nodded slowly.

"Yes," he said quietly, "it is my turn to watch until the morning, Lady Merrivale. But two of Bancroft's men are still prowling somewhere about the grounds, and my mission here is inside the library itself. I shall go along there in a few minutes!"

"Inside the library!" she echoed, and something like a shudder passed over her.

"Yes, I am very interested in that room," he said dramatically, "but you must promise not to mention the matter to the others—particularly to the invalid!"

"Of course I promise!" she answered, without hesitation. "You are searching for a clue. You have an idea that something is hidden in that room—that someone visits that room in the small hours of the night?"

"Let us forget that part of it," he said quietly. "Let us talk of other matters, Lady Merrivale. Yourself, for instance?"

He stood before her in the moonlight, the collar of his grey overcoat upturned, his dark eyes glowing into hers, his voice sending all the blood dancing through her veins.

"I wish to escape from myself!" she breathed quickly. "That is why I have come out here on the terrace, Mr. Serge. My own bedroom was unbearable, and sleep to-night was impossible. I wanted a breath of air, a breath of freedom from all this unutterable tragedy and suspicion of Merrivale Hall. That explains why you found me here."

"I know you are unhappy," he said in the same voice, a voice that spoke volumes at that moment. "But I have offered you the chance of redemption, Lady Merrivale. Why won't you take me into confidence? I have placed the most absolute faith in your words. I have removed all suspicion from my mind concerning you, and yet you still keep me at arm's length. Why don't you tell me all that is in your mind about this terrible drama?"

Something struggled within her to tell him everything at that second, to do as he asked, and tell him what she knew of the Merrivale mystery, but she knew it was impossible even as the thought occurred to

her. She could never break the covenant she had made, the vow of silence that had been imposed on her.

"You do not understand!" she said faintly. "Above all the others, Mr. Serge, I would like to make you conversant with everything, but my lips are sealed. I can tell you nothing—nothing whatever—and that is why everything is so unbearable at the moment. I want someone to trust, someone who will keep faith in me, someone who will believe in me to the very last." She turned aside and the tears re-entered the brown eyes. Serge saw she was on the point of a complete breakdown, an outburst of passionate weeping, and he was anxious to avoid that.

"I am willing to be that someone!" he said in a low voice, a voice that reached her ear only. "Look here, let me propose something, Lady Merrivale. What about a glorious motor-ride to-morrow afternoon? I am willing to act as your chauffeur—or as your escort—just as you like. Will you come with me to-morrow, please? I will bring that Daimler along, and we can go right into the heart of the country—miles away from this place. You want to escape from it all for a day at least."

She turned to him with a little movement of gratitude. The brown eyes were shining dangerously. Her lips grew tremulous. She was overjoyed at his invitation, at his supreme confidence in her innocence.

"That will be splendid!" she exclaimed like a schoolgirl. "Of course I will go with you, Mr. Serge. I am dying for a motor-run. Where will you take me?"

"I haven't the faintest idea!" he answered with a smile. "But it will be miles away from this scene of tragedy and horror—and you will not be troubled with any of Bancroft's men!" he added significantly.

"I am ever so pleased!" she whispered. "What time will you come along with the Daimler, Mr. Serge?"

"Just after lunch," he answered. "I have a lengthy report to make out for the Scotland Yard Chief, which will take me at least an hour, so I will reach the Hall about two o'clock in the afternoon. Promise, however, you will be your real self for one afternoon, Lady Merrivale? The tears are in your eyes at present. You have had days of weeping and sadness. I want to banish all that for one afternoon. Promise you will help me?"

She averted her eyes quickly, for they would have betrayed her at that moment. She even turned a little away from him, but he moved closer to her side, and then suddenly the great moment of passionate surrender came to them both, and she slipped into his arms without a murmur.

She gave him her lips in a wild joy, and Serge crushed her to him with all the intensity of a man hopelessly in love. His arms were round her in the strongest embrace, his kisses rained down on her lips and throat.

"But I thought you were a woman-hater!" she breathed at last, as she lay back in his arms, and the moonlight flooded the terrace with all the witchery of Romance. "They said in the papers that you were a confirmed bachelor, Victor!" she pouted

reproachfully. "And what will Bancroft say when he discovers you have fallen in love with the siren of Merrivale Hall?"

"I have never met a girl like you!" Serge said huskily, as he strained her to him. "That explains perhaps why I have remained free—but you have caught me in the fetters, Sybil, the chains of love that bind one closer than Death itself!"

"You trust me completely?" she begged in that wonderful moment of intense happiness. "You have faith in my innocence? You believe I had nothing to do with these ghastly murders, Victor?" She murmured his name softly, and even before he answered her she pressed her lips back against his mouth. She wanted to kiss him terribly, because it was the answering call of soul to soul, and she knew that Serge meant everything to her at that instant.

"I have never doubted you!" he answered honestly. "Bancroft is a complete ass, Sybil, and Moreton is just as bad. They both jumped to the conclusion that you were guilty, but I knew they had not an atom of proof!"

There was an exquisite interlude after that, an interlude of complete silence and harmony, and time itself seemed to have taken wings. She nestled against him in the moonlight, her head pillowed against his shoulder, her face upturned to his with all the surrender of girlhood and Love.

"I had an idea you were my Fate from the moment you came to the Hall!" she whispered. "But I have seen your portrait often in the papers, Victor, and

you are not such a stranger to me as you imagine. Yes, I have followed all your adventures, and when we met that night for the first time I knew there was no escape!"

"You are happy now?" he questioned. "You really love me, Sybil?"

Her answer was another passionate kiss, heart to heart, mouth to mouth. "Is there any need to answer that question now?" she breathed. "Yes, I do love you, dear—and the tragedy of Merrivale Hall has almost lost its horror. You make up for everything—the hate and suspicion and intrigue with which I have been surrounded, the misery of all these years. I have not really been happy here, Victor. Life has been ever so comfortable and pleasant, but the luxury of everything has been on the surface. There has been no real happiness. It has all been a terrible, selfish dream, and I succumbed to the luxury and wealth like all the others!"

"It has all been a terrible mistake," Serge answered. "You should have kept away from this place like the pestilence, Sybil. You were not made for this butterfly existence. For you, Life holds something definite and concrete, but the others are mere parasites, selfish seekers after personal comfort and luxury, helpless drones in the scheme of things. Why did you ever come to the Hall?"

"I will tell you one day!" she whispered. "You must trust me for the present. When you unravel this mystery—and I know you have almost solved the problem—there will be no need for me to keep silence longer!"

"Why did you marry the baronet?" he pleaded. "Surely that was the most ghastly blunder of all?"

"It was no marriage!" she breathed. "It was only an empty ceremony, Victor, and the others will confirm that if you ask them. There was no sentiment of any kind between Philip and myself, and when I agreed to the arrangement nothing was further from my mind than sentiment. We lived as strangers all that time, occupied separate rooms, and the honeymoon was nothing but a travesty of disillusionment. . . . He never kissed me once, Victor. It was just a matrimonial alliance, part of the mystery of Merrivale Hall, and you will find that I speak the truth!"

He held her to him again, kissing that lovely face and mouth in a passion of strength, whispering words that were sacred for her ears alone.

"The dawn is coming!" he said slowly. "You are made for Love, Sybil, and the sorrow is leaving your life. We shall make up for all you have suffered in the days ahead. How soon will you marry me?"

"As soon as this mystery has been solved!" she answered with quiet determination. "Then you must take me away at once, Victor—and I shall never return to this place. I want to travel with you for months on the Continent, to forget these shadows, these terrible crimes, this environment of suspicion and hate——!"

Serge smiled.

"The dawn is coming!" he repeated. "The Merrivale drama is almost at an end!"

CHAPTER XVII

DR. FRANK MERRIVALE UNDER SUSPICION

TWO days later, just after lunch at the Talbot Hotel, Dunseaton, Serge and his friends were seated in the room specially reserved for them, and all three were smoking and enjoying a quiet chat over recent events.

"You see what those journalists are writing!" Bancroft exclaimed in disgust. "They are anything but complimentary in their remarks, Serge, and I should like to shoot the lot. As the invalid remarked the other evening, a lot of people in this world should be eliminated, and the editor of the *Daily Courier* should disappear first. How the papers abuse the Yard, and you, Serge, have fallen as a popular idol! They think you are suffering from senile decay, that you ought to retire on a Government pension, and that I should be executed at dawn. Moreton happens to be the luckiest. They know nothing about him beyond his reputation as a novelist, so he can make as many mistakes as he likes, even to the extent of falling in love with the saucy Lilian Merrivale! Ah, Moreton, you were caught napping the other day. You have discovered how to make that young lady blush! What do you mean by it?"

He knocked the ash from his cigar and went on chatting good-humouredly.

"One paper suggests a new set of investigators," he proceeded, "and another editor thinks, Serge, that we ought to call in the assistance of Dr. Bonard of the Paris Sûreté! I should as soon think of sending for my mother-in-law! And as for the Chief, he appears to have burst four blood-vessels inside three days! If no arrest is made, Serge, and no further clue can be found beyond that .449 bullet, I suggest we follow the example of the Japs and commit hara-kiri. I have always hankered after immolation and self-sacrifice. You see, old man, the inference is obvious. We must arrest someone, so I suggest we fall back on my original plan and put the bracelets on Lady Merrivale!"

Serge listened with infinite patience and good humour. Not a furrow disturbed his countenance, and he even smiled at Bancroft in paternal fashion.

"I seldom read the papers," he said with a stifled yawn, "and I am not interested in your scheme of hara-kiri, Bancroft. Besides, if your Chief is under the impression he can do better, let him see the Home Secretary and come down himself. You have furnished him with hourly reports, Bancroft, and you can do no more on the slight evidence that exists. As regards Lady Merrivale"—his dark eyes softened unconsciously—"I thought you had abandoned that line of procedure. Your search in her rooms proved fruitless, so why retain any further delusions in that respect?"

"To arrest Lady Merrivale would not be tactful," Moreton agreed, "but I fail to see why you should champion her, Serge. You have held a brief on her

behalf from the first day, and you actually took her for a drive in that Daimler. I imagined that such an action was indiscreet, but Bancroft says you are no fool where women are concerned, and that probably you succumbed to her wiles for a definite purpose. Or, Serge, is it really true? Have you actually fallen in love with that girl?"

Serge evaded the question somewhat.

"It is true I took Lady Merrivale a drive in that car," he answered, "but you seem to forget it was an act of kindness on my part. Lady Merrivale has been completely ostracised at the Hall, with the possible exception of the invalid, and he hardly counts. They all hate that young girl like poison, and Bancroft sees to it that she is tracked from morn till night. I therefore played the rôle of Good Samaritan, and we went for a glorious drive seventy miles beyond Reading. Had I obeyed my inclination, I might have taken her to London and got married by special licence, but that pleasure must be deferred!"

Moreton and Bancroft gasped at the words. They could hardly realise their true import. Was Serge only bluffing, or had he really fallen in love at last?

Bancroft restrained an oath of annoyance. "I had an idea you would do something out of the ordinary, Serge!" he exclaimed. "But perhaps you are playing Romeo just to get the grand secret—eh? That would be a subtle game on your part, and it would pay that girl out in her own coin. What amazing secret did she reveal, friend? I am prepared to bet you made the best of your opportunity? Come, what was the sequel to the glorious motor-ride?"

Serge never moved. He continued smoking with leisurely ease. "We never mentioned the mystery once," he explained. "That topic was taboo between us. Our conversation was delightfully personal, Bancroft, and I confess I have never spent a more enjoyable afternoon. We discussed music, art, drama—we even debated about the new Talkies—and Lady Merrivale proved more human than I imagined. . . . There is a distinct chance that the honeymoon will be spent in Italy!"

Bancroft groaned in despair.

"I can see the horrible outcome of all this!" he exclaimed. "It means Romance with a capital R, Moreton, and the great mystery of the century remains unsolved because a famous crime expert gets mixed up in a hopeless love passion with the chief character in the drama. What a coup for the London papers, and what a wonderful plot for your next book, my boy!"

Serge laughed unrestrainedly. He felt living in a new world these last few days, and Moreton never saw him in a more irresistible mood. However, there was something to be explained.

"Look here, Serge," he said suddenly, "I have a rod in pickle for you. I know you remained behind at the Hall for one evening, but last night you got the car out again after we returned to the hotel and set off for some unknown destination. I had not gone to bed as you thought, so I procured an ordinary push bicycle and followed you!"

"The devil you did!" Serge exclaimed.

"Not that I suspected you of sinister design,"

Moreton continued, "but I feared for your safety, and I was not certain whether you carried your revolver. You turned at last into the Merrivale grounds, and were met by Dawson and Anderson at the entrance. I knew then you were in good company, so I prowled about for two hours, but as there was no sign of your return, I concluded you were going to remain at the Hall, and returned to the hotel. As a matter of fact, you came back in the early hours of the morning. Now what is the game, friend, and why not take us into confidence?"

Bancroft was dumbfounded at this disclosure.

"Well, I'm poleaxed!" he shouted in astonishment. "Fancy Serge being engaged in an intrigue of this kind. Serge, old bean, I suggest you win the sorceress by the light of the midday sun——!"

"Don't be an ass!" Serge responded quietly. "If I decide to indulge in night operations, Bancroft, taking the risk of being eliminated by the Merrivale assassin, I hardly think you should lose any sleep over it!"

"Yes, but apart from your night investigations," Moreton suggested, "don't you think, Serge, we should have the invalid examined by some big Continental specialist? Why should we place absolute faith in Dr. Frank Merrivale? As a relative, he may be a confederate in this business. Besides, the yarn about Harley Street experts may be all moonshine!"

"That plan," Serge said slowly, "might be a blunder of the first magnitude. Even supposing we had ground for suspicion, would it be wise to reveal our hand in that precipitate fashion?"

Bancroft was reflecting on the night operations.

"So you have been spying on the invalid, Serge?" he ventured. "You have been watching everything that occurred in that room on the third landing?"

"No," Serge corrected. "I have never once suspected the invalid, Bancroft. On the contrary, I am interested in another individual?"

"Proust?" Moreton hazarded.

"No, the crimes have nothing to do with Proust," Serge answered. "Believe me, that unfortunate Frenchman sleeps the sleep of the just. There is nothing on his conscience beyond eavesdropping—a practice carried out by the majority of servants to-day!"

Moreton grew breathless.

"Look here, Serge," he asked dramatically, "will you allow me, as a special favour, to accompany you to-night? I promise to keep quiet, and to move like a shadow!"

Serge pondered.

"All right," he said quietly, "you can both come along to-night. Do not think I am trying to steal a march on you. My constitution is more inured to this sort of thing, and I had no wish to disturb your sleep, Bancroft. I have been awaiting developments, and surmise a climax will be reached this evening. We cannot allow these crimes to continue much longer!"

Bancroft was overjoyed at the news.

"Splendid, Serge!" he exclaimed in delight. "I knew you were not going to desert an old colleague, and the Chief will be pleased I am in at the death."

By the way, have you ever asked that doctor chap why he lives away from the Hall? Why does he remain at Dunseaton? Apparently he can come and go when he likes. I have been puzzling that out for hours and can get no solution. Why is one individual favoured more than the others. To boil it down, don't you think Frank Merrivale is a bit of an enigma? He appears a decent sort on the surface, but his urbane politeness may be assumed!"

"That point has badly perplexed me also," Moreton admitted. "The doctor may not be as mediocre as we think?"

"I think he is perfectly genuine," the expert declared. "I have certainly never held any other conviction. He is not a degenerate like some of the others, nor does he appear inordinately selfish. Presumably he draws the same financial allowance, but he is a married man with wife and two children, and his profession is quite legitimate. He has retained a degree of suspicion against Lady Merrivale, but that thought may have been generated by the solicitor. As Proust mentioned, the solicitor may be a potential figure!"

Serge rose to his feet. There was an occult gleam in his eyes. His ears, keen, trained, alert as ever, heard those running steps, that breathless dash of the hotel attendant to their room, and that hurried knocking at the door.

"Come inside!" Serge ordered.

"Lady Merrivale has rung up from the Hall, sir!" he said breathlessly. "She wants to speak to you at once. Something terrible has happened!"

Serge left the room without a word, and his two friends exchanged looks of deep apprehension, glances fraught with the greatest uneasiness and alarm.

"What is it this time?" Bancroft muttered with dry lips and a supreme effort at control. "Moreton, I am squeamish over that phone-message. I have a horrible thought another tragedy has taken place. Did you see the expression on Serge's face as he left the room? He was prepared for anything!"

"I have the same horrible conviction," Moreton answered. "Bancroft, I wish we could get to the end of this business. These horrors are playing the deuce with my nerves. The Merrivale drama has started to prey on my mind. I can get no sleep of any kind!"

Serge returned in a few seconds. He was dressed for departure, and there was a worried look in his dark eyes. He turned to Bancroft with a gesture of weariness.

"It is worse than I feared!" he said grimly. "Tabitha has been poisoned!"

Bancroft stood speechless. He was transfixed with amazement. Moreton rose also, but his legs were curiously inert. He swayed in giddy fashion. This was more than he could stand. Surely they had reached the heart of the jungle at last! Tabitha poisoned—three men shot down! Heavens, was it really the end?

"It is not true!" he gasped.

"Yes, the message is correct," Serge answered, buttoning his great-coat. "Lady Merrivale explained why Dawson did not ring up. He and Anderson would have heard a revolver shot, but this is different.

Poison is more silent, deadly, and effective. Dr. Frank Merrivale is racing back to the Hall, and doubtless he has reached there by this time. Come, shake yourself, Bancroft. The car with all speed!"

Bancroft staggered from the room, his brain in a torpor, his senses drugged. This case threatened to unhinge one's mentality. It upset every canon of logical thought, for there was no clue of any kind, no path out of the wilderness. And as usual, those reporters would be making mischief, sending out, through their papers, blacker headlines than ever, rousing all England to the ghastly events occurring at Merrivale Hall. He, Bancroft, would be recalled by the Chief in twenty-four hours, and Serge would be the laughing-stock of two Continents!

"When are these horrors going to end?" he asked between clenched teeth.

Serge looked at him in a strange silence.

"They will end to-night," he predicted firmly. "They must end to-night! Fate will be remarkably kind for once. Then I will act without mercy!"

There followed that wild rush back to the Hall, with Serge making the car leap like a demon of speed, and as they raced through the quiet Dunseaton village, the inhabitants knew that another sensation had occurred at the Hall. Serge was now a familiar figure in the neighbourhood, and these crimes were being discussed every moment of the day!

Dawson met them at the terrace steps.

"The doctor arrived three minutes ago!" he announced. "He is upstairs with Miss Tabitha at present. Two reporters are using the telephone, and

they seem to be sending messages to London at express speed!"

"Curse them and their reports!" Bancroft shouted furiously. "Curse the whole press of the kingdom, Dawson. The sooner you and I start growing oranges in Spain the better!"

Serge jumped from the car and entered the Hall without a word. He found the sitting-room packed with Merrivale relatives—just like the former occasion—all debating the latest development of the drama, all talking in excited groups. The servants were running about the corridors; pandemonium reigned at the Hall.

He entered the smoke-room and Lady Merrivale came to him at once. Even Bancroft was impressed by her grief. There was no mistaking the sincerity of it. She was sobbing her heart out, and listening to those sobs, Moreton felt renewed qualms about having doubted her. No actress could have manufactured those tears. They came from her soul itself.

"Our tribulations will never end!" she moaned piteously. "The rest of the Merrivales suspect me now worse than ever. Yes, Tabitha has been poisoned, and they said I am responsible. They accuse me of this terrible thing. Lilian and Kate are packing for the London train, and I am leaving for Tunbridge Wells to-morrow. The housekeeper went ten minutes ago. She cleared off in a taxi without a single trunk. We can't stand this thing longer!"

Serge, with an instinctive movement of protection, placed one arm round her and led her to a chair. "No matter what the others think," he said quietly, "I

have faith in your innocence—and I have already told you so. Never mind the others. They are distracted by what has happened, by the increasing number of the crimes. Yet matters have reached a climax. The whole business must end to-night!”

“Tabitha was unwell all morning,” she continued, “and she told me she had slept badly all night. I was not perplexed by that, for I had no sleep of any kind, and Tabitha was much upset by Cecil’s death. He was her favourite brother, and although she hated the life he lived, she would never allow a word against him. That is just the Merrivale inconsistency!”

“What happened afterwards?”

“I told Frank when he arrived this morning, and he went straight to her room. He returned and said she was complaining about pains in the head, and he said he would send her up a headache powder if I would get a glass of water. I did so, and Frank put the powder in the glass before my eyes. I was going to send it up by one of the maids, but decided to go up myself. When I entered her room, Tabitha was in a kind of doze, so I woke her gently, and told her to drink the powder Frank had sent. She thanked me for bringing up the glass, put it on the table, and said she would drink the stuff in a few minutes——”

“You did not wait——?”

“No, she has always been a trifle peculiar, so we make allowance for her. I went away from the room, leaving the glass untouched on the table, and came down to the sitting-room. Twenty minutes later Tabitha’s scream rang through the Hall, and running upstairs I found her choking and gasping. She said

she had been poisoned and fell back unconscious on the pillow. I rushed to the telephone, got through to Frank's house, and rang you up afterwards. That's all I know about it."

Frank Merrivale came to Serge in a few minutes. He was dressed in the usual conventional style, self-possessed as ever, and bestowed on Serge a friendly nod.

"This place is getting like a Chamber of Horrors!" he said dramatically. "What do you think of the latest incident?"

"How is she?" Serge asked.

"Thank heaven, I pulled her round safely!" the doctor announced. "She would have gone under in seven minutes, but I gave her a strong emetic which produced wonderful results, and she will be normal in fifteen minutes."

"What was the poison?"

"Can't make out yet. Arsenic suggests itself, but it is a matter for the experts, and I do not claim to be a toxicologist!"

"It was a near shave?"

"The heart had almost stopped when I arrived. She was sinking into an unconscious coma from which she would not have emerged. Fortunately my wife acted with great presence of mind. She got the message from Sybil, and sent another car to meet me coming from the Hall. I got here just in time!"

Serge was looking into space!

"You are certain it was a headache powder?"

"Yes, I have no doubt about it," was the confident reply. "I took the powder from my pocket in front

of Sybil—a plain headache powder I always carry—and it was poured into an ordinary glass of water. What happened afterwards is a mystery. . . . It was Sybil who carried the glass to Tabitha's room!"

The words had a horrible significance.

Serge nodded comprehensively. "There was an interval of twenty minutes," he speculated, "during which, doctor, anything might have happened—and you had left the Hall! Send Proust to me!"

Proust was easily found. He was in the immediate vicinity of the door.

"You heard everything as usual, Proust?" Serge demanded.

"Yes, sir," was the candid reply. "I have been listening very attentively."

"I appreciate your honesty. Now listen to me, Proust. With your ever-watchful eye, you saw that glass of water brought upstairs by Lady Merrivale—the glass containing a single headache powder?"

"I saw that incident distinctly, sir. . . . But nothing else, Mr. Serge, for Mr. George called me at that moment, and I brought him the latest tidings about Miss Tabitha, sir!"

"You heard the terrible scream?"

"Yes, we all heard it, sir. It was awful. I shall never forget it to my dying day. Mr. George has been trembling ever since. He thought at first it was Lady Merrivale's voice!"

"Ah!—and after the scream, Proust?"

"I hid in my room, sir. I was frightened to death. I suffer badly from nerves this weather!"

"Poor chap, how I sympathise with you! . . . And there is no sign of the missing revolver yet?"

"No sign whatever, sir. And, Mr. Serge, I forgot to mention, but Mr. George Merrivale sent his compliments and wants to see you at once. He would like to discuss the whole situation, he says!"

Serge looked stern. Anger blazed across his face, and he rarely betrayed himself.

"Tell your employer that he has wasted enough of my time," he said quietly. "He will understand that message, Proust!"

Proust looked exceedingly discomfited, but he bowed to the ground and left the room like a shadow.

Serge turned to the doctor.

"May I ask Tabitha a few questions?"

"By all means," was the quick answer. "She has practically recovered. I shall remain here until she is completely normal—and in case you want me, Serge!"

Bancroft maintained a strict silence during this interrogation, but he held his own views nevertheless. He followed Serge and Moreton upstairs, but at the back of his mind was that significant fact that Lady Merrivale had carried the glass to Tabitha's room. Yes, without a doubt the case was nearing a climax!

Tabitha was lying white and exhausted on her bed. Kate moved silently from the room, but Serge looked after her with a curious intentness. Then his eyes went to the deathly white face on the bed.

"Sorry to find you in this state!" he said as cheerfully as possible. "I am not going to worry you with questions, Miss Tabitha, but I have come along

to ask you what has happened? Can you tell me in a few words? I think there is something on your mind you would like to tell me personally? You can trust me, can't you?"

She looked up into the strong kind face, into the dark glowing eyes, and smiled faintly.

"Yes, I can trust you," she whispered with quivering lips. "I will tell you all, Mr. Serge. This last affair has nothing to do with the Merrivale drama—nothing whatever. It is all plain sailing, for—*I did it myself!* Yes, I was tired to death hearing them call me insane, and, as I was getting no sleep, something did really go wrong with my brain. I took two small arsenic pills—I have always kept them in case of emergency—but they were not potent enough and Frank—thank God—saved my life!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MURDERER

THAT evening, close on midnight, Serge, at express speed, drove the Daimler towards Merrivale Hall. Bancroft and Moreton, according to promise, accompanied him, their nerves tuned to the highest pitch. Serge, enigmatic as ever, pulled the car up sharply at last.

"A surprise visit," he explained, "so we must avoid the entrance. Moreton, the walls of Merrivale Hall stretch in front of you for miles, so let me see you pair nip over them. Dawson must come along for

the car later. Once over those walls, silence is imperative, and if you must speak, let it be in the smallest whisper. I must enter that library unobserved, so keep your revolvers handy. We are up against a very sinister force, and my own revolver is loaded. I intend to shoot at sight!"

Moreton scaled the wall without difficulty, but Bancroft, more bulky, was glad when the feat was accomplished. Serge went over the obstacle at a bound, but he was an athlete, and always in the pink of condition.

They moved forward in Indian file, taking a narrow path leading straight to the Hall, but before many seconds passed a black shadow confronted them, and they looked into the muzzle of a revolver. It was Anderson patrolling the grounds, and they made out the outlines of his face.

"Hands up!" he shouted. "Poachers, journalists, or whoever you are—up with your hands! Quick!"

Serge chuckled. "Splendid!" he exclaimed, "but not so loudly, friend. Congratulations on keeping awake, but keep your finger off that trigger. Thank you. I don't want my digestion disturbed at this hour, Anderson. Now we can breathe more comfortably!"

Anderson, with an oath of consternation, jumped back.

"Heavens, it's Mr. Serge!" he declared. He signalled to someone behind. "Come on, Dawson, I've got them all right—but not the party you think!"

Dawson came out into the clearing, and Bancroft nodded to him also. "Glad to find you about," he

said in his best official manner, "but we are paying the library an unexpected visit, and we thought it best to avoid the main entrance. You had better cut over that wall, Dawson, and mind the car until we return. You will find it if you follow this path—but remain there until we come ourselves or send a message!"

The men saluted in the darkness and stole away with furtive tread. They knew the anti-climax was at hand, and their satisfaction was unbounded. They had patrolled these grounds with unceasing vigilance, at every hour of the day and night, relieved by the other two men, and they thanked their stars they were nearing the end of the quest.

Meanwhile, Serge and his companions moved forward. They made a wide detour of the terrace and reached the library eventually, the window of which remained open. They entered noiselessly, but did not switch on the electric light, and remained close to the wall near the window. After that, their vigil commenced.

It was an eerie business, with a dead body lying a few yards distant—for the inquest on Cecil had been postponed—and Moreton found his nerves strained to breaking-point. They knelt on the carpet, their revolvers ready, their ears strained for the least sound, their eyes staring at the walls on either side of the room.

The minutes passed slowly, almost interminably. It was a ghastly business, Moreton thought, for the Hall seemed alive with ghostly visitants, with strange creatures from an occult world, a sinister

Presence who shot men down mercilessly in cold blood. Moreton's fingers tightened on his revolver. He knew he would shoot to kill if the chance offered, and what a dramatic end it would be to a never-to-be-forgotten adventure! His limbs grew stiff, his body ached all over. He had no idea how long he remained there, in that cramped attitude, his brain throbbing, his nerves twitching with a dumb excitability. He wanted to do something, to cry out, to end that awful tension of waiting . . . waiting!

Bancroft and Serge were more used to vigils of this kind, but even Bancroft got strung up! His nerves were at a loose end. He had no objection to flesh and blood enemies, he would face desperados with cheerful courage, but he drew the line at spectral visitors from another world—for how, he asked, could anything but a ghost come through a blank wall? What did Serge mean by this stunt? What had he up his sleeve? He stole a glance at the expert and marvelled. Marvelled at that tense, waiting face, those unwavering dark eyes, eyes fixed so patiently on the walls of that room. Bancroft gripped his revolver more tightly. He poised it in readiness. There would be no mercy as far as he was concerned!

Suddenly Serge held up a warning hand! . . .

Moreton gave a gasp of relief. Action of some kind at last, for there was the distinct sound of footfalls coming along some hidden passage, just like the tread of a child! Who could it be? . . . Whoever it was, the sound came from behind those impenetrable walls. Was it Proust? Would Proust be the sensational apparition to emerge, or was it the doctor, or Henry

the solicitor? Perhaps—uncanny thought—it might be Kate, with that pale, death-like face, or could it be the bold, saucy Lilian? Bancroft went over all the characters in sequence, but he left out Lady Merrivale. He knew now that girl was innocent! Conviction had come to him slowly, but he knew Serge was right in that respect. . . . The sweat stood out on his forehead, every nerve strained itself to the utmost limit. Moreton felt his heart pound like a hammer, and instinct told him they had reached the end of the Merrivale mystery. His throat was dry and half-parched, his eyes burned in the darkness, and he had an uncontrollable desire to cry out, to laugh in mad derision! But he held on grimly, watching Serge like a hawk, waiting for a sign, a signal to jump at the ghostly visitant who would emerge from behind those walls!

It was then the miraculous happened. An aperture suddenly appeared on the wall opposite, a vacant space followed by a man's head, a pair of gleaming eyes, and a large torch. Moreton almost screamed at that second, for the face was that of George Merrivale—or his double! Those eyes peered into the room, craftily, with suspicion, as if expecting an ambush. Suddenly the baneful, murderous eyes detected those of Serge, and he brought a revolver to the aperture. At that instant Serge fired at the intruder—and just in time! The ghostly figure reeled back, shot through the shoulder, and fell to the floor with a crash. Serge darted forward, thrust his left hand in the aperture, felt about for a hidden spring, some bolt or catch that would open that elusive door—and then, finding

a lever, pulled it down. Immediately the giant book-case swung outward, away from the wall, revealing a wonderful passage into the darkness beyond. Serge brought his own torch out, stepped over the fallen body, and dashed down the passage!

An hour later, seated in the smoke-room of Merrivale Hall, Moreton and Bancroft heard the full story of the great drama. Outside in the hall, Dawson and Anderson were pacifying the relatives and servants, answering their questions briefly, and telling them everything would be explained in a few minutes.

"Thank God, the curtain has dropped!" Serge said dramatically, puffing contentedly at his briar pipe. "The doctor is attending to our prisoner, Bancroft, and he will be charged with these three crimes. I have just come down from the room where he is lying, and he has given me a full confession. His shoulder is being bandaged carefully, and it was a good job I only winged him. Had he fired at that second, however, I should not be breathing so comfortably!"

"Is it George Merrivale?" Moreton asked with feverish excitement. He felt like a sick child desperately eager to hear the name of the wicked goblin.

"No, but you are near the mark," Serge answered genially. "The Merrivale assassin is the invalid's twin-brother! That is the man who will pay the penalty on the scaffold!"

"My God!" Bancroft muttered. "And where did the passage lead?"

"To the porter-lodge itself. The man upstairs has masqueraded under the name of Leo Tracy. He is

the last of the Merrivales, and he has acted as lodge-keeper and gamekeeper!"

"But what prevented him living here like the others?"

"Ah," Moreton ventured, "I can guess that. He's a suspect wanted by the police!"

"Perfectly correct," Serge affirmed. "Oscar Merrivale, alias Leo Tracy, is the man we want for a South Kensington murder, a crime committed several years ago. He was known then as Mark Satterley, and we have complete evidence of his guilt!"

"And he is the real owner of Merrivale Hall!" Moreton gasped.

"Yes, he made his pile in the States, and George acted as his partner for a long period. He owns the 'Taff Yale Oil Group,' which is still harvesting thousands of dollars, but Oscar was the man at the head of affairs. George retired when the spinal trouble commenced, and as the twins refused to separate they left the States together, but the huge profits continue!"

"So they came to England and hunted up their poor relations?" Bancroft was beginning to wake up from the hectic nightmare.

"Yes, but here is the extraordinary part. The twins are the illegitimate progeny of old Sir Roger Merrivale, the former baronet, and they were ostracised by the Merrivale crowd. They went to America with their birth stigma upon them, and the baronet, who never recognised them beyond a small pittance, finally disowned them, and it was thought they passed into oblivion!"

"So when the dollars arrived they planned a vendetta?" Moreton's mind was beginning to grasp things.

"Yes, the baronet died in the interval, and the other Merrivales were ignorant of the wealth the twins had accumulated. When George and his brother came to London, Oscar got himself mixed up with that woman in South Kensington. He was posing then as Mark Satterley, and her death was the result of that intrigue. He strangled her without compunction, escaped the authorities, and we have been searching for him ever since!"

"So the twins drifted to Dunseaton and purchased the Hall?"

"Yes, George managed that part of it, but Oscar signed the cheques through his American bankers, and lay low in Reading. The Hall was formerly an Elizabethan mansion, so George had it completely rebuilt, but arranged for this secret passage to be left intact, and the architect thought it merely the eccentric idea of a millionaire!"

"Why the secret passage?" Bancroft asked.

"Because Oscar determined to live at the lodge, and fulfil the duties of keeper until the hue-and-cry died down, and Leo Tracy was quite a different individual, when disguised, to the Mark Satterley who committed the Kensington crime!"

"Why then was he afraid of detection?"

"Because of the scar down his left cheek, so his wig of white hair proved most effective in the interim. The scar is also disappearing."

"He abandoned the disguise when visiting the Hall?"

"Yes, but let me explain the mystery. When the Hall was rebuilt on the most modern lines, the twins decided on an elaborate scheme of retribution. They determined to avenge themselves on the Merrivale crowd, and probably their retribution scheme is without parallel in history. George, with his master-mind, thought it out and Oscar was the willing confederate. They hated all the Merrivale group, and George was clever enough to grasp one big trait of psychology. The Merrivales have all proved inordinately selfish, with a great weakness for luxury and personal comfort, and the twins played on that peculiar characteristic in the blood-stream of their relatives!"

"How?" Bancroft spluttered dazedly.

"George hunted up all the relatives, found them in the most chastened circumstances, brought them to the Hall, and revealed his plans. He explained their wealth in the States, said his twin-brother died in New York, and promised a definite allowance to each providing they remained at the Hall. They signed a covenant that they would not divulge the ownership, for George made it appear that he was the owner, but he never held the title-deeds at all. Oscar was content to remain at the Lodge, and so the explanation of the secret passage was preserved. Oscar used that passage when paying a visit to his brother!"

"Who purchased the estate?" Bancroft asked shrewdly.

"Henry, acting at the dictation of George Merrivale. As I say, they were all sworn to a covenant of secrecy, and had that covenant been broken, it would have

meant expulsion from the Hall, and a cancellation of the monthly allowance. So they fulfilled the conditions without protest, thinking it merely the caprice of a wealthy relative!"

"But why keep them all at the Hall?"

"Because the invalid has a super-intelligence, and it was his brain that moved behind Oscar in the States. Oscar was the man of action, but George was the thinker and philosopher. The twins have preyed on the selfishness of the Merrivale group, hoping they would degenerate in that terrible environment, and knowing their lives were in reality a kind of hell. Cecil and the two half-brothers succumbed, while the others have suffered from sapped will and decreased vitality, and they have existed in an environment of suspicion, intrigue, and hate. But they were content to exist in this beautiful old place with all its wonderful scenery and abounding wealth. The foreign servants were engaged because they were more permanent than English servants, and George wanted no strange rumours about Merrivale Hall to get abroad!"

"And Proust?"

"The invalid brought him as a special trophy from Paris, and he conveyed all the news of the Merrivale household. Proust never knew that Oscar was alive, nor did he discover those nightly visits. The Frenchman was told on one occasion that it was the solicitor who visited the invalid, and that explains his suspicion about Henry Merrivale. Besides, Proust never went to George's room until the invalid rang that bell. On that point he was adamant!"

"And the disguise?"

"That point is easily explained," Serge answered. "The twins have been passionately attached to each other, and there was really no necessity for the disguise during the midnight visits. George, by the way, is sinking fast. He will hardly see the end of this week. He is a victim of heart-trouble, and this climax has hastened everything. He will go off in one of these heart-attacks!"

"Why the crimes?" Moreton asked fiercely. "And why was a special privilege granted to Frank and Philip?"

Serge smiled grimly.

"You must understand," he said slowly, "that Lady Merrivale has been the unconscious victim of a lot that has happened. George fell passionately in love with her when she came to the Hall, and he was jealous of everyone who looked at her. Philip succeeded to the baronetcy, and George advanced the proposition that he should marry Sybil and remain at the Hall, but the marriage was only to be a matrimonial arrangement. It was really to give Lady Merrivale the chance of acting as hostess to any visitors who might have been invited to the Hall, and it was a plot to keep her here as well. The girl wanted to escape from the Merrivale environment, and thought, as Philip's wife, she might obtain greater freedom. She wanted to make long visits to Europe and Asia, and thought the invalid would ultimately agree to that, but he as obstinately refused, and the brief honeymoon proved a complete farce."

"And Frank?"

"That showed the invalid's brain-power again.

He knew suspicion should not be raised about the Hall inmates, so he allowed the young Merrivale doctor to carry out his practice at Dunseaton, providing he acted as George's attendant, but the invalid was really aiming at Frank's degeneration like the rest!"

"And Henry paid the allowances?"

"Yes, Oscar obtained all the money he wanted from the States, and the transfer to George was a simple matter."

"And the murders?" Bancroft asked in a stern voice.

"Everything worked smoothly for the twins," Serge proceeded. "But the time came when three men—Philip, Stephen, and Cecil—had to pay the penalty of their knowledge. They knew too much!"

"They discovered the midnight visitor?"

"Yes, they were in the library one night discussing some recent mandate of the invalid, and planning how best they might outwit him. After the discussion they went upstairs together, and remained on the landing for a further whispered talk. It was then the uncanny thing happened. They saw that figure emerge from the library, but they never dreamt it was anyone but the invalid. It gave them a terrible shock, and they made for their own rooms, but Oscar knew he had been observed, and reported everything to the invalid. After that the fate of those three Merrivales was sealed. Oscar determined they would pay the penalty of their knowledge. The invalid protested desperately against the plan, but Oscar was adamant, and he secured George's revolver and ammunition for a definite purpose. One after the other those three Merrivales

were silenced, Oscar selecting the most favourable moment for his purpose, and no clue was left except one .449 bullet!"

"Who made the aperture in the wall and contrived the revolving bookcase trick?"

"The sliding panel was built in the wall when the secret passage was constructed, and Oscar used it to make certain the coast was clear before he entered the room. It was quite an easy matter to dispose of his victims, and that explains their look of amazement when the shot was fired. Oscar could not afford to take risks, and he did not wish those stairs watched!"

"How did you get on the track of the sliding-panel?" Moreton asked with deep admiration.

"I suspected the existence of it, but found it impossible to discover, although I spent two long nights in a vigorous search."

"And why the secrecy over the .449 bullet?" Bancroft inquired.

"I had a grave suspicion against Proust for a considerable time," Serge explained, "because I imagined he was a woman masquerading as a man! He walks from the hips downward, moves in feline fashion, and is woman-like in his tread. His skin is soft, his figure wonderfully supple and graceful, and his walk puzzled me a long time. But he proved genuine. . . . The discovery of the bullet in the bookcase gave me a shock, because when I tapped the wall I knew it was hollow, and that was my first big clue. I have been diligently searching for the secret panel, Bancroft, but it was impossible to find for the simple reason that it opened from inside, as you saw

to-night, and I had to operate the lever from within?"

"But we could have blown the whole place to atoms," Bancroft expostulated.

"That would not have suited my purpose. It was necessary to catch my man red-handed, and I knew he would betray himself by another visit along that passage, so the only plan was to pay an unexpected visit to the library. Something prompted me to avoid the main entrance, and that was the best stroke of all, for Oscar thought I had given the Hall a miss to-night!"

"Why did you shoot so soon?" Bancroft asked quietly. "You generally give your worst enemy a chance, Serge!"

"Yes, I know," Serge replied coolly; "but it so happened that we were all excellent targets at that moment, Bancroft, and I thought it best to upset the aim of the gentleman with the .449 ammunition. You had better go along to him now and arrange for his removal to Scotland Yard. As for you, Moreton, I was told that Miss Lilian was particularly anxious to see you on the terrace, and, believe me, that is the best place for a courtship!"

A few minutes later Serge was seated alone in the smoke-room, when the door opened and Lady Merrivale came slowly forward.

"The dawn has come!" she said softly.

Serge rose and took her silently in his arms.

THE END

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